

イラスト：そと
小木君人

森の魔獣に 花束を

GAGAGA



Flowers for the Forest Beasts

— Mori no Majyuu ni Hanataba wo —

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[Yoraikun Translation]

- STORY -

In a world dominated by swords and magic, Cleo lives his lonely life where he believes painting is his sole purpose to life. Since Cleo was born in a noble family, he must prove himself worthy to become the family's successor by participating in a certain trial. As he enters the forbidden forest, Cleo encounters a beast that is half human and half plant. After being easily captured by the beast that resembles a human girl, Cleo plans his escape by attracting the beast's interest and keeping Cleo alive. Out of his expectations, the time they spent living with each other made him feel unbelievably relieved. However their calming daily life did not last very long

小木君人
森林の魔獣に花束を

イラスト：もと





じやいいただきました。

あー...あー...
待つてっ...！



絶対殺すわー！
アシタムネー！
絶対殺すわー！

プロローグ

011

魔の森へ

012

人喰い花

048

月に唄えば

081

青い薔薇

117

森の破壊者

137

秋来りなば冬遠からじ

218

決意の剣

252

おやすみロザリーヌ

293

エピローグ

308



イラスト：そと
小木君人

森の魔獣に 花束を





人物紹介

タレヲ

名家の子息。絵を描くことが生きがい。

ロザリーヌ

魔獣の少女。人間を捕食するが、性格は無邪気。

Prologue

A world where swords and magic existed as a large force to move society.

The village was called Clamberra. It was a small, decrepit village stationed in the outskirts, and less than an hour's walk from it was a forest so vast it was called a sea of trees.

The forest was overflowing with life. It was abundant in the game sought by hunters, timber for the fire, and valuable herbs to process into medicine. Had it only relied on that grace, Clamberra would have undoubtedly ended up a far livelier village than it was now. But unless the unthinkable happened, the villagers would never approach the first.

For the villagers knew. They knew that the forest's depths concealed a grotesque existence, a fearsome man-eating monster.

In such a forest lived a girl.

It was a forest people rarely entered, so she was always alone.

But seeking something in the sea of trees, adventurers of some stripe would seldom tread into its threshold. When they did, the girl would call out to them from the gloomy shadows.

Someone, save me...

Into the Forest of Magic

1

Tap, tap.

In the construction of a splendid manner, did they even take into mind the sound made when knocking on its doors? A comfortable noise resounded as if hit out of a keyed instrument.

“Wait, please wait a second.”

While knowing it was futile, the lord of the room raised a hurried voice in reply. As expected, the door was swung open regardless. A man with posture so splendid it brought to mind a bow whose string had been pulled to its utmost limit briskly infiltrated the room without a single word of warning. This was a man as if fearlessness itself had put on a suit to go for a stroll. Yet his eyes bordered by glasses emitted a neurotic, cold glimmer. The room’s owner- Cleo Grant- felt his spine freeze over on that look.

“Umm...”

“You’re keeping everyone on the first floor waiting. You haven’t finished preparing yet?”

The man shifted his eyes to glare at the rucksack with its mouth slovenly left open atop the bed. From the opening, he caught a glimpse of a sketchbook and a case of watercolor paint. In an attempt to hide the bag, the buy hastily placed himself between the man and the bed, but it was already too late.

The man’s name was Marcus, he worked as a butler to the house. Looking down over Cleo, who had jerked his head up at a forty-five degree angle to look at him, he exhaled a sigh from his nose.

“When you’re taking on a life-or-death trial, you take along your art supplies? You must be quite confident in yourself.”

Marcus said with no attempt to conceal the thorn in his words. If it was the usual sarcasm, Cleo would have silently hung his head as per usual. But now that his paintings were involved, Cleo's timid, drooping eyes blurred with a very faint shade of anger.

"...Are you going to tell father...?"

For just a moment, Marcus curved the corners of his mouth into the face of someone who had been privy to a terrible joke. He immediately returned to his usual expressionlessness.

"My job is not to keep watch over you. No matter what mental state you take on the 'Blue Rose Trial' with, it is of no consequence to me. Please do as you will."

While this man was a butler, he took on an impolite attitude unbecoming of one employed by the Grant House. But Cleo wasn't surprised. Ever since the day Marcus first came to the mansion five years prior, he had never once paid respect to the Grant House's eldest son.

This was a fact evidenced in the way he tapped at Cleo's door. After so long, it was unthinkable he remained oblivious that two knocks was to check for a vacant bathroom.

He bowed and spoke formally, but the lack of any resemblance of heart behind it was something even- then ten year old- Cleo could understand. Cleo was fifteen now, there was still little he could do.

Let's say he tried raising up Marcus' discourtesy and ice-cold attitude to his father, the head of the Grant House. In most cases, it wouldn't be strange for Marcus' dismissal to come as a result. That being the case, his father valued proficiency over anything else, and Marcus was a man whose proficiency far exceeded his father's expectations.

(On top of that, I was never proficient. I could never exceed a single one of father's expectations...)

So Cleo silently endured. Between himself and Marcus, whose side would his father take? He didn't even need to test. In these past few years, Cleo's father had never once been the one to strike up a conversation with him. Cleo knew no hopes had been placed on his shoulders.

He did feel some loneliness from that fact, once upon a time. But now Cleo was glad that was the case.

His father would no longer scream, “And you call yourself the successor to the Grant House!?”

The home tutors who would mercilessly smack him with words and real whips were not visions of the past, whose names he could no longer recall. Now, without anyone raising a complaint, he spend his days painting whatever he wanted. Are you satisfied with your current self? The question was a difficult one, but at the very least, Cleo accepted his life as it was. I guess this is about right, he thought.

And yet, why must he take on a life-or-death trial?

Cleo had a naturally weak body and was prone to illness. His mother Rosaria shared the sane constitution, she died young of disease. Surely that’s how I’ll go too, he’d often tell himself. And yet why wouldn’t they simply let him be? Why would they pull him from his comfortable room, put a sword and shield in his feeble hands, and send him into a dangerous forest where the beasts ran rampant?

Putting in just a sliver of discontent and resentment- for that was the most Cleo could muster- he stared up at Marcus. Marcus rung his nose anew, sending Cleo’s gaze barreling elsewhere.

“Whatever the case, please hurry with your preparations. Your time of departure cannot be changed. Everyone has set aside their busy schedules to gather.”

With those words, he turned right around and left the room with the same force he entered with. Stricken by a sense of defeat words fail to describe, Cleo sluggishly closed the mouth of his rucksack. He sent a glance to the window. On the bay windowsill grew a potted plant that sprouted countless thorns. It was a plant called a cactus. He could only hope that someone would properly look after it in his absence. With such musings, he slung the rucksack over his back.

Erk...!?

With weight he had never experienced in his fifteen years of life digging into his shoulders, he found himself leaking a groan. If he let his guard down for just a minute, it felt as if his whole body would be sent toppling backwards. The bag contained a sleeping bag, his art supplies, a raincoat to shelter from the rain, a canteen. If that was

all, it wouldn't be so heavy, but because a shield called a buckler he was made to carry for self-defense was strung on, the load became something incredible. To add to that, he would be given a sword and made to wander the forest for days. This was torture. Cleo felt his mind grow distant.

Exiting to the corridor with heavy, hazardous steps, he totteringly staggered forward. Time and again driven by an impulse to turn back, he eventually found himself before the second-floor door leading to the entrance hall. With a crack of the door, the heat and vibrant voices of people surged the gap like a flash flood. It was almost as if he had wandered his way onto the grounds of a party.

Cleo rounded the door. The entrance hall was an atrium, and through the handrail, he peeked in at the state of the first floor. A look down confirmed all the dignitaries of the Grant House had gathered. The red carpet spread out from the door to the grand stairwell in the center of the room divided the gathering in two.

Facing the stairwell, at the head of the party to the right, a group of familiar men were having a friendly chat with his stepmother Audrey. Beside them, her son about to turn three Laurence- Cleo's stepbrother- gripped his mother's skirt with a bored look on his face.

Meanwhile, at the head of the left side, his father's younger sister and her spouse- meaning his aunt and uncle- fidgeted, looking around restlessly. When their faces grew close, they would whisper something into the other's ear.

While everyone seemed to be having an enjoyable chat, there was no exchange of words between the left and right fathering. Like two parties of customers forced to share a table at a restaurant, the prevalent attitude was as if there was no one at all across the carpet.

From what he could tell at a glance, there were a little less than double the amount of people in the right hand gathering. And right in the center of the two rows, directly in front of the grand stairwell, Cleo's father, the one who stood at the summit of the family, Foster Grant closed his eyes as if meditating, awaiting his son's arrival.

When he thought of how so many people were waiting for him, he grew a little fearful. His desire to turn back had reached the climax, but the wrinkle chiseled into his father's brow told a tale, "How long will Cleo keep me waiting". Cleo shivered as he recalled the sound of his father's whip. His feet began to move on their own, starting

off slowly towards the stairs. Those that noticed him raised cheers. As he heard their voices, he felt like a slave warrior heading off to the arena.

2

To those gathered, Marcus once again gave an explanation of the 'Blue Rose Trial' Cleo was to undertake. Cleo gazed on, feeling like he was day dreaming.

In the forest where the blue roses grow, there is a possibility of encountering dangerous beasts... one swordsman will accompany and cooperate... when he finds the blue rose, and safely returns with it by sunset ten days from today, Cleo-sama will be recognized as the official successor of... if he doesn't make it in time, or returns without the blue rose, the rights to succession will automatically pass to his younger brother Laurence... that is all, does anyone have any questions...

By the time he noticed it, a tall man clad in leather armor was standing before Cleo. That man who could be made out as an adventurer as a glance presented out the rugged palm of his hand, large enough to grab Cleo's head whole and hoist it up.

"My name is Greg Lee. It's a pleasure to work with you. No matter what happens, I'll guarantee your safety, so just know you stand on steady footing."

As Cleo timidly reached out Greg firmly grasped his hand and gave a refreshing laugh. Scattered claps and cheers. Within all of that, from the depths of the crowd, his aunt and uncle raced over, somewhat excited.

"The future of the Grant House depends on you. Break a leg!"

"For my late sister-in-law as well, you must find the blue rose at all costs!"

Cleo answered their abnormally heated encouragement with a cold look.

(Mother's sake...? Would mother really be happy if I succeeded the Grant House?)

He drudged up some old memories. The painful ones came back the most vivid.

When he was around six or seven, his father personally trained him on how to ride a horse. After falling again and again, "Why can't you follow a simple direction!?" came the whip. Two hours into training, Cleo fell unconscious. When he came to, he was in his room's bed. His body was wrapped in bandages. His mother was by his side,

“I’m sorry...” she said.

His mother’s eyes were red. Why was she apologizing? The young Cleo couldn’t tell. But he was excessively saddened, he burrowed into the bed, and shook as he wept. Across the cover, he could hear the sound of his mother’s sobs, and the bruises all over his body throbbing in pain. That pain was something he could recall clearly, as if those wounds still remained fresh.

(Did mother wish for me to succeed the Grant House...)

He couldn’t understand what was going on among the adults, but it did seem the Grant Family was divided between those who wanted Cleo to succeed the main house, and those who wanted to make his little brother Laurence the heir. Perhaps his aunt and uncle represented the former.

(Father likely intends to make Laurence the heir. At the very least, he hasn’t any intention to have me succeed him.)

In the first place, the ‘Blue Rose Trial’ was apparently a Grant House tradition carried out whenever opinions were split on who would succeed the house. Meaning this aunt of his had voiced complaints at his father’s attempts to make Laurence the heir.

(I never asked for it...)

The manufactured smile reeking of falsehoods spread across his aunt’s face only served to rub his nerves the wrong way. So, “It’s not for mother’s sake, but for yours, is it not?” he felt he was almost about to say.

Just a little more—but in the end, Cleo swallowed his words. If he said such a thing without bearing the mood in mind, he would slather mud on his father’s face. He didn’t have the courage for that. Diverting the words he would spit to the depth of his stomach, his mood worsened as if they had raised up heartburn.

At that moment, Cleo’s gaze coincidentally caught it.

His stepmother Audrey took a look at his aunt and uncle returning to their place, for just a moment—the corners of her mouth lifted in a scoff.

With a thunder of applause and support left and right, Cleo proceeded down the red carpet. The servants opened the door. Far, far beyond it, a different set of servants

were swiftly opening the iron gates around twice the height of an adult. To him, it felt almost as if they were trying to tell him, "Just hurry and leave".

He passed through the door, took a step out of the manor. It was hot. Narrowing his eyes to the summer sun so bright it might be out of spite,

(Perhaps I won't be passing through this entranceway again...)

He thought.

3

Cleo left the estate and boarded the carriage that had been prepared. The sun had set by the time they reached a village called Clamberra. The mere sway of the carriage had worn him limp, and in the sole run-down inn in town, on an unbelievable hard bed, he fell asleep in an instant.

The next morning, coinciding with Cleo's waking came a slightly-late departure. Scorched by the midsummer sun, a walk of less than an hour finally led them to the forest they were looking for.

"Uu... whoa...!"

Cleo was overwhelmed by the scenery he took in for the first time. The large trunks he had to look up to see, expanded without end or exhaustion. In his head, the sheer mass before him was large enough to swallow up a single country whole.

"Have you readied your heart? Then let's be off."

Entering the forest on Greg's urging, in an instant, the air had changed.

(It's cool... as if it's another world...)

The gentle breeze that had coiled tepidly around his skin outside the forest had become a comfortably cool one here. His beads of sweat vaporized, swiftly cooling down the heat remaining in his body.

(And... what a beautiful light.)

Where trees sprouted plentifully was a forest. Cleo was by no means unaware of this.

Looking at the trees growing in the yard, he had imagined what it would look like for there to be droves of them. But now, a real forest entering his eyes, he learned what he had imagined had surely been lacking. The light filtering in through the trees.

Of course, light filtered through the yard's tree. Something was different. The forest was a majority, a world cloaked in shadow. The shadows associated with anxiety. And onto those shadows, passing through the gap between tree and tree, a meager light illuminated the space. With nothing but trees as the backdrop, the grass and moss coating the ground shone as radiant as a gemstone.

The overwhelming shadow offered support to a single strand of light. What a peculiar sight.

(So this is the beauty of the forest...)

He found himself leaking a breath of admiration. By the time he noticed it, Greg was peering fixatedly into his face.

"Ah... m-my apologies. This is the first time I've ever seen a forest..."

Greg blinked his eyes.

"The first? You've never played out in the woods or something like that before?"

"N... no, well..."

"Hmmm. I guess that's how it works for the young master of a distinguished house. They really are different from us."

His tone had grown a little more lax than when the first exchanged words of greeting the day before. Cleo had never come to a forest before, because in his youth, studies occupied his every day, and he was rarely ever taken out anywhere. While his days of study ended with the birth of Laurence, even still, Cleo was restricted from freely walking outside. In Marcus' words, 'It would be a considerable hassle if you went out and got injured or sick'.

Therefore, to Cleo, the grounds of the Grant House alone were the world.

Without any motivation to purposefully explain all those details to Greg, he simply plaid it off with an ambiguous smile. He wouldn't reveal his own miserable past to put

a damper on his own excitement at his first forest.

Perhaps picking up his sentiment- or having intended that as trifling banter- Greg didn't touch on the topic again. He slowly produced a small, round case from his bosom.

"This is a 'charmed compass' that points towards Clamberra village. The one you've got should point to the blue rose, right? I'm counting on you to lead the way."

"Ah, yes...!"

When Cleo tugged at the string around his neck, a similar charmed compass popped out from inside his vest. The two of them each held out their compasses and compared them. Had its own direction to point to.

A charmed compass was used in correlation to a black ore called a guide stone. Where a normal compass pointed north, a charmed compass would always indicate the direction of its stone. Inside the forest, the magnetic field was thrown off, and there were times when a normal compass would be of no use, but irrelevant to disturbances in magnetism, a charmed compass would always move its needle to point in the direction of its guide stone. A single compass formed a pair with a single stone, each pair being registered and managed with its own identification number. Even if there were multiple guide stones around the compass, the charmed compass was made to only react to the stone that shared its identification number.

The guide stone of Greg's pair was buried on the outskirts of Clamberra village. In regards to Cleo's compass, it was said that the founder of the Grant House buried the guide stone where the blue roses bloomed around two hundred years ago, or perhaps the old Grant received 'The compass that shows the path to the blue rose' from a certain adventurer for a large sum of money. Accounts varied on the matter.

"Umm, our family's compass is pointing in that direction."

"Sure enough... hmm, got it."

Greg took a look into the forest depths Cleo pointed at and nodded.

"What do you wanna do? Shall we get some rest in before we go? It was quite tiring just to walk here, wasn't it?"

“You’re right... but I can still manage.”

Thanks to Cleo’s oversleeping that morning, they were a little late to leave the inn. Over a cup of coffee, “I don’t mind,” Greg had laughed it off, but it weighed on Cleo’s mind. He wanted to regain the difference.

“You’re better off not pushing yourself. Trudging through a forest will be more grueling than what we’ve been through thus far.”

Greg peered into Cleo’s face with the look of a doctor performing an examination. Cleo said he was alright, he s took out his chest.

“...Very well. Then at the very least, let me carry your shield. It’s heavy, isn’t it?”

Greg pointed at the shield fastened onto Cleo’s rucksack.

“Eh... but...”

He recalled Marcus’ words. ‘In the forest where the blue roses grow, there is a possiblity of encountering dangerous beasts’. In times to come, the shield may prove necessary. That’s precisely why he grit his teeth, and endured the weight biting down on shoulders.

“But you see, Mr. Cleo, pardon the question, but do you even know how to use a shield?”

Cleo had to shake his head to that one. For both the shield and the sword, yesterday had been the first time in his life he’d ever held them. I knew it, Greg continued on.

“A shield you can’t use is just a burden. For the amount it slows your movements, the road will be even more perilous. Needlessly expended stamina will hinder the search to come.”

Greg was a professional adventurer. His words held too much weight to refute.

“But... will you be alright?”

Greg used a two-handed longsword, so a shield was unnecessary. It should be an unneeded burden to him as well. When Cleo looked at him with upturned, apologetic eyes and asked, Greg bared his teeth in a laugh.

“This much weight is nothing. And I’ll serve as your shield, so don’t worry about it.”

He proclaimed so easily it really did sound like nothing at all. Those words shook Cleo’s eardrums, they jolted his brain. Hiding his flushed, hanging head, he spoke back incoherently.

“Aah... uu... umm... it’s a pleasure to... work with you...”

Feeling that words alone wouldn’t suffice, he deeply lowered his head. Greg gave a bitter smile, “Hey, that’s my job. Now let’s get going,” Cleo heard him say.

His head still hung, Cleo followed along diagonally behind the man. Making sure he wasn’t noticed, he quietly wiped the corners of his eyes. It felt as if it had been quite some time since someone had been so kind to him.

4

While noon gave way to a beautiful forest, an excellent piece of fine art no matter where one directed their eye, as the sun lurched, and the crowns of the trees offered only the faintest illumination, the scenery suddenly changed face.

A stinging, bizarre tension loomed over the area. Even for one who wasn’t a professional adventurer like Greg, Cleo was able to pick up a clear something. As if there was something lurking in the shadows of each tree and thicket, stifling its breath to observe them.

An indescribable anxiety welled up to throw his pulse into disarray. If he hadn’t been afforded a fellow traveler on this ‘Blue Rose Trial’, if he was by his lonesome self in the thickening darkness of the forest, the mere thought sent something cold running down his spine. On his slight shiver, Greg raised a surprised voice.

“Huh? Don’t tell me you’re cold?”

Cleo gave a vague laugh, “The forest gets a bit creepy when the sun goes down,” was all he said.

In the end, the day’s search ended there. In the meager remaining light, they needed to set up camp.

“This... is delicious!”

Around the crackling bonfire, the two ate their dinner. Theirs’ was a simple menu of skewered animals caught in the forest toasted over the fire.

“We’re really in luck today. The red tree crabs are tasty, but they’re few in numbers, and you rarely ever meet them. You can find plenty of blue tree crabs by the river beds and marshes, but they reek of mud and taste nasty.”

Greg was in high spirits from an unexpected catch. When it hadn’t been asked of him, he began running his mouth, mixing in some bragging about his past tales of adventure. Cleo was so entranced he thought he might forget to blink.

“...If my sword was just a centimeter shorter, I’d be in the other world by now. Ever since then, I got to trusting the length of my sword more than my shield. By the way...”

Greg took a greedy glance at Cleo’s baggage.

“That sword of yours... could I see it for a moment?”

“Mn? Yeah, of course. Go ahead.”

“No, my apologize. Truth is, it’s been on my mind since yesterday. I guess this is what you call an occupational disease... hmhmm.”

Reverently holding out the short sword Cleo handed over, he drew it from its sheath. In contrast to its beautifully ornamented scabbard, the blade and the hilt were the sort of plain piece you might find anywhere. But after a grunt from Greg, he gazed silently at the sword as if possessed by something.

“How does it look? To a layman like me, it just looks like a normal sword...”

Greg didn’t answer. It did seem he had completely forgotten about Cleo. The honed edge and Greg’s eyes glowed red as they caught the flickering light of the writhing flames. After some light practice swings, and balancing its guard on his finger—

“Pardon me,”

He said, and suddenly thrust the tip of the sword into the bonfire.

The heated tip sucked in the wavering cusp of the flames, giving off a red glimmer like a ruby. Cleo lost his words in his surprise. Greg muttered, making the face of someone who couldn't believe his eyes.

"It's the first time... I've ever seen adamantite...!"

"Adamantite...? W-what's that?"

Without turning an eye to Cleo, Greg spoke as if talking to the sword itself.

"Have you ever heard of the ship, the Queen Grizelda, Mr. Cleo?"

"Mm... no... I don't know it."

"It's a ship that sunk hundreds of years ago, but the rig was salvaged a round thirty years back. It was a nobleman's ship, loaded with all sorts of treasures, but a majority of those were corroded by the seawater, becoming little more than garbage."

Of course, they still had enough historical value- he added on, before continuing.

"Among them, they found a single sword that shone as if it had been made only yesterday. When it wasn't made of gold or anything, I hear it didn't have the slightest touch of rust. That sword was an adamantite sword. Mr. Cleo, how long has this sword been at the Grant House?"

"Eh? Er... I don't know..."

"This just might be that very same sword. That's just how rare adamantite is. And its other characteristic--"

The sword glowed again, its transparent edge emitted light from within.

"It absorbs fire and glows. In order to temper adamantite, you need to keep heating until it glows so bright you have no choice but to shut your eyes. The smith needs to be skilled enough to hammer out a sword blindfolded. There are only a few people in the world capable of such a feat."

The light of the sword resided in the eyes of Greg gazing at it as well. With the hollow light in his eyes, he voluminously unfurled his words as if possessed.

“Even so, a sword made of Adamantite is brittle, it shatters too easily. They’re not suited for real combat. They’re an ornament piece, or a magician might use one for self-defense, that’s mainly where you’ll find them. Well, a common adventurer would never even be able to hold or swing one like this. I really am in luck...”

Eventually, the light subsided, returning to a dull, silver shine. Greg made a face like a child after the fireworks had burned out, letting out a pitiful sigh. He timidly poked at the blade.

“It’s not hot”

Is the heat all converted to light and dispersed...? He muttered to himself. A while later, he noticed Cleo staring intently at him.

“...Ah, AAH! No, my apologies for that. You have my thanks, and take it back.”

Returning the sword to Cleo, he let his awkward gaze wander.

“Now then, it’s about time we get some rest in. We’ll have to watch the fire on rotation... Cleo-san, you go to sleep first. In two... no, three hours, I’ll wake you up.”

The conversation was cut off somewhat forcefully. Cleo wanted to hear more about adamantite, but even if the weight of his heavy shield had been taken on, the fatigue of walking through a forest all day had definitely accumulated. This would go on for perhaps another week. If he dragged his fatigue onto the next day, he would end up causing trouble to Greg. Cleo obediently prepared to sleep.

When he tried removing the sleeping bag from his rucksack, the boy of paint supplies entered his eyes.

(I’d like to find time to paint at least one.)

Pulling off his boots, he entered a sleeping bag.

A first forest, a first taste, a first sleeping bag. His heart soared, giving him difficulty in falling asleep. When he mused over how nice it must be to have a sleeping bag, his face went lax on its own.

Even so, given ten minutes, Cleo was raising a sleeper’s breath.

Greg looked into the distance, as if recalling the glimmer of adamantite from before, looking up at the slight slimmer of stars through the gaps in the leaves and branches.

Exactly one hour after Cleo raised a sleeper's breath.

Disguising himself with the crackling of the fire, Greg quietly collected his belongings. Cleo's sleeping face popping out from the sleeping bag was more tranquil than anything.

"Cya, young master."

Leaving behind a practically inaudible whisper, he produced his charmed compass from his bosom, confirming the direction its needle pointed. Alright. But that did leave one problem.

(The adamantite sword called a dream. That's a piece that'll likely never enter my eyes a second time. Should I nab it, or leave it... what do I do?)

Greg's material desire throbbed vehemently. I want it. I want to make it mine. Or perhaps I can sell it off for a fortune. But in the end, he gave up. It was dangerous to take back what would leave a trace.

(If I wait in Elkada Village, that second wife's envoy—Marcus was it—will bring over the contingency fee. Five hundred thousand gelt. That's enough for me.)

Driving his thoughts towards the sum he would eventually lay hands on regardless, he made a grin and bounded into the shadows of the thicket.

5

A while later, the roaring shriek of a beast rended the forest's still. But such noises were transient, and soon the only sound came as the leaves being swayed by a gentle breeze.

6

A dreary world as if dust had settled on an oil painting in the storeroom.

A Cleo of young countenance was sitting before the flower bed in the yard and sketching.

He was finally allowed to paint. No, even when he did paint, no one scolded him anymore. The whip was gone too. When he should have been delighted, it wasn't any fun. Perhaps it had been too long, he couldn't draw as he wanted.

(Dammit...!)

Gripping the pencil in his palm, He scribbled out nonsensical line after line on the drawing paper. As if expressing the negative emotions he was in no deficit of, the paper slathering black before his very eyes.

At that moment, a voice suddenly called from behind. A voice he knew well.

"It's been a while since I last saw the young master paint. Did they finally give permission?"

Cleo turned only his torso to look around. There, was—

Cleo blankly opened his eyes.

In his vision, the branches spread out to cover the night sky, as if a tree monster was trying to give him a start. Where was this?

(...That's right, I'm in the middle of the 'Blue Rose Trial'.)

Good grief, he sighed.

(How long have I been asleep? Greg said he'd wake me up after three hours...)

As if turning over in his sleep, he looked in Greg's direction... but he was nowhere to be seen.

Huh?

Changing his facing direction, he looked the other way. But no luck there either.

He undid his sleeping bag's fastener and raised his body. He turned in a circle to look around.

There really was no one. Only the bonfire whose flame had weakened somewhat in force raised a crackling sound.

(.....Huh...?)

Terrifying scenarios swept over his brain all at once.

"...Mr. Greg...?"

No response.

He tried raising the volume of his voice a bit and calling out again. No matter how long he waited, all that returned was the sound of the fire, and the gentle wind racing across the forest. His unease welled up.

Greg was gone. Where did he go?

(The bathroom? No... that's unlikely.)

He could simply take care of business in a nearby thicket. He had no need to go somewhere he couldn't respond.

(Then why... where could he have gone off to...?)

Thinking didn't produce an answer. "No matter what happens, I'll guarantee your safety," he had said. Then what sort of reason would have him leave Cleo behind and leave?

It was there Cleo noticed. His baggage was gone.

A scenario that grazed his head snuck its way in once more. In the blink of an eye, it inflated like a balloon, and he could no longer play the fool.

(Mr. Greg... didn't go off just anywhere... he went home...)

His heart acted up, badum, badum. It acted up as it to tear a hole through his chest. His breath was rough. The interior of his tight-clenched fist oozed with sweat. Why? What for?

Cleo couldn't tell. In the first place, he was unable to think rationally.

In the first place, that wasn't the most important thing at the moment. If Greg truly did go back—(I... have to escape from this forest on my own...)

Was he even capable of the feat?

7

Using the position of the constellations, taking the season into consideration to presume the current time was a skill he did not have. But equivocally looking up at the sky, it wasn't hard to guess that the night wouldn't break sometime soon.

He waited around an hour. While he didn't have a watch, it was presumably an hour. But no matter how he waited, Greg didn't come back after all. Cleo felt as if he was watching a dream, sitting in front of the flame raising smoke into the sky.

Snapping a branch of dry wood in two, he tossed it in.

The bonfire blazed in a dug-out put around fifteen centimeters deep. To the side of the hole, was the pile of dirt dug out of it.

"If you dig a hole and light a fire inside it, you don't have to worry about the ashes spreading. When cleaning up, you just have to bury it with the dirt you dug out. To top it all off, when grilling, the height of the fire is just right, it's real convenient. Truly three birds with one stone."

Greg had explained to him with a smile. He was a world apart from those home tutors who brandished their whips as if training a beast, and never smiled no matter what he accomplished.

(Did Mr. Greg... really abandon me and go back...?)

Can someone really show such kindness towards someone they plan on betraying?

Various people came and went from the Grant House estate. Those folks would never extinguish their smiles. But over fifteen years, Cleo had grown to notice a majority of their smiles were false.

Was Greg of the same sort? Deceiving Cleo with false kindness, sticking his tongue out in his heard? Cleo couldn't believe it.

He gave a big sigh.

(What... am I going to do now.)

The 'Blue Rose Trial' was the least of his worries. That being the case, even if he wanted to turn back, without Greg's charmed compass, there was no way of knowing the direction of the closest village of Clamberra.

No food stock. Greg had taken off with all the dried meat and preserves.

If he wandered the forest without knowing the direction he was headed, it was likely a death by starvation that awaited him.

No, perhaps he wouldn't even be afforded that.

For example, once the bonfire died out, at that instant, the beasts that thirsted as if they were waiting for it might come at him.

The sensation of being observed by something in the darkness. When he didn't even want to recall them, Marcus' words came back again. 'In the forest where the blue roses grow, there is a possiblity of encountering dangerous beasts'.

Dangerous beasts...!

While Cleo's sword was apparently a valuable, noteworthy piece, that fact held no meaning with a complete novice as its wielder. Naturally imagining himself being devoured alive, the insides of his body froze up

Ever since his mother died by disease, Cleo had thrown his life aside. It's not like I'll live a long life, he was sure. However, that didn't mean he didn't mind having his rawhide stripped life, his flesh gnawed at, spending his final moments in unbelievable pain.

If that's the case—he drew the adamantite sword behind him from its scabbard and touched the metal to his neck. With a prickling pain, the tip dug into the skin.

At that moment, the sensation of, 'At this moment, I am on the verge of death,' exploded in his head. The contrary states of life and death could be switched out oh so easily in just a number of centimeters. His arms shook, he got the feeling he might really stick it in.

And then what would happen?

A geyser of blood would flow out. There's no way it would be painless. He wouldn't be able to breathe. There's no way it would be easy. He would surely go through a hellish pain. Until the moment he stopped drawing breath.

"...uuWAAAh!"

As if brushing off a snake coiling around his hand, he tossed the adamantite sword aside. A disgusting unease spread bit by bit across his spine. Holding his ceaselessly shaking hands to his body, he crouched down as if collapsing.

(No... I don't want to die like this...!)

His tears spilled out onto the ground.

So opened a night non-permitting a wink of sleep.

The forest the morning sun couldn't reach was still dim. Yet this was no longer the sort of darkness with something secretly lurking. A faint heat could even be felt from the shadows in the vegetation.

The bonfire had just barely held out. Cleo gazed fixatedly at the flickering red ash with bloodshot eyes. Fatigue and drowsiness made his head somewhat hazy. Even so, he had somehow arrived at his answer. He had hardened his resolve.

He was going to walk.

If we simply walked straight, he would eventually exit the forest without fail. He had made it all the way here in a day, so with good luck, he might be able to leave it in one.

Of course, Cleo was aware it wasn't something so easily. But saying it was impossible and giving up wouldn't grant him an easy death. That was far too terrifying, so Cleo decided to proceed blindly. Whatever the case, now that he had decided, he was best off acting on it quickly. If he didn't make it as far as he could in a day, he wouldn't be able to light a fire at night. The matches had gone off with Greg.

He shook his canteen to confirm his remaining water, moistening his throat with only one swig. Covering up the burnt ash with dirt, he strung his rucksack over his shoulder.

8

A few hours from a resolved departure. It was likely a little passed midday.

Walking straight was more troubling than he could have imagined. No matter how thick the thicket grew, he would have to plunge straight through it. For the steep slopes that were practically cliffs, he would cling to the plant life, sliding down bit by bit with due caution. Naturally, during that time, he would confirm which way was 'straight' again and again to ensure he didn't lost his direction.

The rate he progressed was likely less than half of the day before. Even so, it strikingly depleted his will and stamina. A forced march far too harsh to challenge sleep-deprived. He had gradually grown unsympathetic to the adamantite sword clanging loudly against his thigh, and unable to put up with it any longer, he stuck it into his bag.

As he gradually lost his breath, his legs growing heavier,

(Am I really walking straight...?)

An anxiety hazily spread through him. His morning resolve was already wavering.

To add insult to injury, an empty stomach spurred on his spirit's breakdown. Thinking of nothing but the red tree crab he had eaten the night before, he walked while dragging his feet. When his entire field of vision was covered in trees, for some reason, he couldn't catch sight of a single one that bore fruit. Had he possibly gone out of his way to chose a route that avoided all the fruit bearing trees? Such misgivings welled in his chest.

(How many more hours will I be walking with no food...)

It was still faint, but he was catching sight of the limit to his stamina.

When he was walking because he didn't want to die, the more he walked, the closer he seemed to death. He felt the contradiction of his actions. Wouldn't it just be easier for some carnivorous beast to make short work of me when I'm out cold from the fatigue of walking—he noticed he had begun to think and learned that his spirit was reaching its limit as well.

It could be god, or the devil, or even Marcus. Cleo sought salvation, he made an earnest entreaty in his heart. But,

(If Marcus was here right now, there's no way he would save me...)

He thought, a self-depreciating laugh bursting from the depths of his stomach.

"Ff... haha... khahahah..."

The laugh showed no signs of stopping. Even when he lost sight of what was supposed to be funny, Cleo continued to laugh. Surely something must be wrong with me, he thought. A while later, when he had finally contained his laughter, large tears were falling from his eyes.

Crumbling at the knees, he collapsed onto the ground. By the time he noticed it, Cleo was sobbing convulsively.

(Someone... someone...)

"Save me..." he heard a voice.

Cleo's shaking breath came to a sudden stop.

His moist eyes opened wide. At first, he thought the voice in his heart had unconsciously opened its mouth. But now in his head, he tried to reflect once more on the faint voice that plunged into his ear. It wasn't his own voice he had learned over the course of fifteen years.

He blankly surveyed the area.

No one, nothing around.

Surely it was his imagination. Or perhaps the cry of some bird. Come to think of it, while he was walking, there was a monkey-like lifeform at the top of the trees, staring curiously at him. Perhaps he had mistaken the cry of some forest lifeform for human words.

He waited motionlessly a while to see what would happen, but nothing came of it. He really was just imagining things, or so the moment he accepted it,

“Save me...”

It was faint, but he certainly heard it. Undoubtedly a human voice. What’s more, judging by its pitch,

(A girl...? Why...)

A young girl wandering around the forest prowled by dangerous beasts. He couldn’t help but feel something was off. But they did say there were a few young women among the ranks of adventurers, so it wasn’t an impossible tale.

Cleo concentrated every nerve in his body to his ears. Even killing his own breath, he patiently waited until,

“Someone, save me...”

This time, he could confirm the direction it came from. He quickly got to his feet, and made for it nimbly as his body would allow. The hope swelling in his chest gave him a strong push on the back. As if his raggedness from a moment before had been a lie, his feet moved. He pushed his way through the fierce thicket.

(Whether it’s a little girl or some female swordsman, the fact they’re in the forest means there’s a high possibility they have a charmed compass.)

And more than that, having a person nearby would free him from the anxiety of loneliness. Even if they didn’t have a compass on their person, if he had a comrade he could exchange encouragement and cooperation with, he got the feeling that alone would greatly increase his probability of returning alive.

“Please, someone save me...”

It was much clearer this time. And close.

He could see a bright spot in the depths of the frontward thicket. That must be it!

It happened when he sprinted forward at full speed. The corpse of a small animal had fallen under the clump of grass under his feat, causing him to slip. The moment he realized his situation, his body was in the air.

Rolling alongside a scream, he pierced headfirst into the thicket, to find himself in a slight clearing. The midsummer afternoon sun poured onto the ground without interruption.

“Owww... tsss...”

As luck would have it, thanks to the sleeping bag in his rucksack acting as a cushion, he got off with just a scrape. That being the case, the inside of his head was still swirling in circles.

Cleo unsteadily raised his body to look around.

There was no one there.

(Huh... this wasn't the place...?)

He tried waiting a bit, but he could no longer hear that voice from before.

“Heeey, is anyone here?”

He shouted to no response.

(No way, don't tell me...)

He had definitely heard the voice from this area.

(Don't tell me..... it was an auditory hallucination...?)

Astonishment ensued. Had his spirit pushed to the brink had fabricated a nonexistent hope? His knees were shaking, he could no longer bear the weight of the bag on his

back. Cleo's bottom hit the ground as he hung his head crestfallen.

".....Ah!"

He raised his face, hurriedly looking around.

When he had worn away his nerves to such an extent, he noticed that he had lost sight of the 'straight' direction he had walked for dear life. The blood withdrew from his face.

(The distance I've walked for hours just went poof... I'll have to start from square one.)

The inside of his chest muddled with a black sense of despair.

Am I beyond salvation... he thought.

"...No! That's wrong! I'm only hopeless if I give up here!"

Cleo turned the gears in his head to an absurd degree. What will giving up get me? Do I accept my fate of being a beast's meal?

"Hell no! You've got to be joking!"

He smacked his power-drained legs a few times to inject them with motivation. In a show of fighting spirit, he stood. If he followed the tread grass and broken branches back to the spot he first heard the voice, he'd be able to get back somehow or another. All that was left was to depend on his memory, the same scenery from before- the shape of the trees and grass, their position- he'd have to search for it. If he did, then he'd surely be able to tell where he had walked from, and where he was walking to.

"So there's no one here! Am I right!?"

He tried one final call. No response.

Alright! He started walking back towards the thicket of tattered twigs he had just broken through.

It happened then. There was a sensation of something touching his ankles.

Oh? The moment he turned his eyes to look at them, the earth and the heavens were

swapped.

It happened so suddenly, Cleo was at a loss for words. Right above his head was the ceiling-like ground. The sunlight shone down from his feet. This upside-down scenery was almost like another world. As his rationality gradually returned, he finally comprehended his feet had been tangled in something, and that something was handing him upside-down.

(What... is this...)

He heard a swish in the shadow of a tree with a large trunk and its undergrowth, something was moving. And slowly, it made its way towards him.

(.....Eh...?)

Something tread over the wild plants, as if rising to the surface of a pitch-black bog, it slowly showed its form under the light of the sun.

It was a young girl, exposing her bare skin.

From her back drooped a number of tentacle-like appendages, their tips squirming eerily. And among them, one of them had extended forward to grasp Cleo's feet.

The girl gave a sweet smile.

"Thank you for coming."



じやいいただきました。

あー...あー...
待つてっ...！

The same voice as before. In Cleo's head—how many times had it been—those words resounded.

'In the forest where the blue roses grow, there is a possibility of encountering dangerous beasts'

The young girl stuck out her dark-red tongue to lick her lips.

The Man-Eating Flower

1

Ukuh, ukukukuh... ukukufufuh...

In correspondence with her laugh, the young girl's slender shoulders finely shook.

Like an infant who didn't know the meaning of modesty or shame, she laughed innocently, or perhaps frankly. Yet to Cleo, that sounded like the laugh of a demon.

That face, those hands, those feet, at a glance, she was no more than a little girl, but it was clear she was no human. Humans don't grow feelers.

The girl's feelers drew him closer until there were only twenty centimeters between their two faces.

Wild overgrown hair, that didn't look as if it had been cut once since the moment she was born, the large, pointed eyes peering from within stared intently into Cleo's face with the full curiosity of a kitten. Already terrible at dealing with looks from people, Cleo averted his eyes to flee from her gaze.

Her throat rung out another ukukuh, she moved her small, lovable mouth.

"It's rare to be able to catch another human so quickly. Hey, is this what it means to be in luck?"

"...P-pardon?"

Cleo hesitated at the sudden question. The young girl blinked her eyes.

"Eh? What? Did you just say something?"

She gazed at Cleo, a blank look on her face. Unable to grasp his opponent's meaning, Cleo found himself in confusion.

"U... umm... are you..." In an attempt to reach mutual understanding, he eagerly tested

out conversation. But the girl opened her small mouth wide and spoke.

“Then it’s time to dig in.”

The inside of her open mouth gleaned into Cleo’s field of vision. Inside the dark-red membrane, sharp tapered canines gleamingly caught the light.

“Ah... whoah... w-wait!” Understanding the meaning of ‘Time to dig in,’ Cleo recklessly squirmed his body. But the second, then the third feeler extended, restraining his body without any mercy to spare.

“Ah, I’m sorry. I forgot to land the killing blow first. It will be painful if you’re still alive, right?”

The girl gave an understanding smile. She smiled as she entangled her almost-transparent white hand around Cleo’s throat, quickly putting in power. It wasn’t an arm strong enough to break the bones in his neck, but with an accurate hold on his carotid, his consciousness was melting into white.

“...Wait... save me... I’ll do any...”

I’ll do anything, so please save me—he intended to say. But whether the words escaped his mouth, or merely reverberated in his own head, Cleo could no longer tell.

In his meager last remnants of rationality, he thought. At this very moment, without any pain or suffering, in a sense he would greet a peaceful death. He’d only be eaten after that, so it would be far easier than being ripped open alive by a carnivorous animal.

Yet even so, he was resisting and pleading for his life.

He couldn’t stick the sword in his throat. He couldn’t let himself become beast food alive.

Yet, even without any pain, he still couldn’t.

(What’s this... so in the end, I wanted to live, did I...)

He used his fading mind to deride himself.

Even if he noticed his true feelings at this point, it was already too late. Hazily in his head, and gradually clearer, the nostalgic faces floated up. His mother. And one more. The one who had come out in yesterday's dream...

"Hey, were you serious when you said anything?"

All of a sudden, the mist in his head cleared, the faces of the nostalgic deceased extinguished alongside it. When he came to, the young girl in question brought her face close enough to hold, gazing deep into Cleo's eyes.

".....Eh...?"

"As I was saying, you're really do anything, will you?"

The girl's fingers had left his throat.

In his unawoken head, it took a little time for him to comprehend his present situation.

(I'm... still alive...?)

2

Cleo was lowered to the ground, though the beast's tentacle was still firmly entangled around his leg.

"Come to think of it, I'm not in an 'I have to eat a human right now!' sort of mood right now."

The girl's eyes run along Cleo, sprawled out over the ground. From the top of his head to the tip of his toes.

"And you don't look too tasty to begin with."

Cleo made a stiff smile of social courtesy. Not being eaten was surely a good thing, but even so, being told he was unappetizing was a light shock.

What should I do with you, the young girl crossed her arms in thought. Like a child choosing out his birthday present, she tilted her head, a broad grin on her face. Cleo hit against his throbbing head- either because he had been hung upside down, or because his neck had been strangled- to sweep away the remaining mist. Eventually,

he regained enough rationality to grasp his present situation.

The feeler wrapped around his leg was something like the tendril of a plant. Perhaps she could grow them however she wanted from her back, as its length seemed to change at will. Judging by how easily she lifted up her body, it could be presumed they boasted considerable power and control.

And about the problematic girl herself... at a slight glance, three points caught Cleo's attention.

First was the flower resting on top of her head. While it resembled a rose, it was a type of flower Cleo had never seen before. Practically the same size as her head, each time she moved her neck, its bright golden-yellow petals would tremble.

Another was her vibrant, green hair, as if to meld in with the forest in the current season. It caught the midsummer light giving off a young and lively sheen.

But the greatest thing weighing on his mind was the fact she was naked.

From what he could see, her age was around Cleo's, or perhaps a little younger. Fitting of her age—while it might be meaningless to measure a magic beast by human criteria—she properly stuck out in the places that were meant to stick out. Cleo's face turned bright red, he quickly cast his eyes down.

"Ah," came the girl's voice. Thinking she might have figured out his eyes had gone to her chest, Cleo's body jerked up. But, "Alright, I've got it!" she hit her hands together with a cheerful face. It did seem she hadn't noticed Cleo's gaze in the slightest. For the time being, it was a relief, but he couldn't lift his head. If he did, he would see. He'd no longer be able to think straight.

"Hey you, I've got it!"

"Oh... that's good."

".....?"

The girl tilted her head.

Cleo kept his head down.

“Hey... I’ve got it, you know?”

“Yes, what is it...”

“.....”

“.....”

The awkward air only made it harder for him to raise his head. Listening to the pounding tone of his heart, he continued delivering a hollow gaze to the grass whose name he didn’t know growing at his feet.

All of a sudden, Cleo’s head was wrapped in vines, forcefully tugged up.

His eyes met with the girl’s. Similar to her hair, her eyes were leaf-green as well. She glared down at him, with a dubious face. Her chest abruptly entered his vision as well.

“Hey, I’m telling you I’ve got it!”

“Y-yess...! What do you want me to do...”

Cleo was practically on the verge of tears, even so averting his eyes and resisting to the end. Unable to comprehend the delicate mentality of a timid pubescent boy, the girl tilted her head.

“You’re weird,” and, “Whatever,” she muttered, and entered the main topic.

The vines pointed Cleo’s face even higher.

“Look. On the top of the tree. Can you see it?”

“...?”

Cleo focused his eyes. He did get the feeling there was something on the canopy, but the layered tree leaves and branches dispersed his vision, he couldn’t make out anything clear. When he tried even harder, something moved with a gleeful shriek.

“Was that... a monkey?”

“Right, right, monkey.” The girl gave a delighted nod. “Those lot, see, by the time you

notice it, you find them staring holes into you like that. It's annoying, but they're always up there, and they're quick, so I can never catch them."

"...I see."

"That's why I want you to catch them. I always wanted to have a taste. For the time being, one is enough."

"I see... what?"

The vine entwining his face was released, finally freeing him. Cleo took a glance at the girl's face. Imagining the unknown taste of a monkey, she was making the sort of smile as if her heart was full of expectations. He took another look at the spot he presumed the monkey had been. Around fifteen, perhaps sixteen meters off the ground.

(I wonder if that's higher than the estate back home. At the top, the branches... get really thin.)

From the moment he was born, Cleo had never climbed a tree. Would he be able to climb so high for the first time in his life, and play a game of tag with the nimble monkeys?

(There's... no way I could.)

He didn't even get the feeling it was possible with a stroke of good luck. If there were one hundred Cleos, and they all tried to catch them at once, it would undoubtedly still be impossible. Before any monkeys were caught, one hundred fallen corpses would bury up the ground.

Cleo couldn't take up a job he had no hopes of accomplishing. He reluctantly mumbled to the girl whose smile pleaded, 'Quickly, quickly,' beside him.

"I'm sorry... that's impossible."

The girl opened her eyes wide.

"Impossible... you mean you can't do it?"

When Cleo gave an apologetic nod, the girl's blankly open mouth changed faster than a sudden evening shower.

“Why? You just said you would do anything!”

Power surged into the vine binding his leg. Knowing her anger, Cleo raised a scream in his heart.

“Y-you have my apologies. When I said that, I meant whatever I’m capable of...”

With flowing motions, he groveled on the ground.

“Then what’s the point? I didn’t hear anything about that.”

The words she spit out in irritation fell like thunder. Cleo buried his face into the grass-smelling ground. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, he repeated. Dripping in cold sweat, he soaked the blades like the morning dew.

The summer sun mercilessly beat down from the sky. He was dotted in spouts from two forms of sweat. Appearing alongside the sound of swaying branches, the cool breeze chilled his damp body and left. A while later, a similar wind took the vanguard once more. The cold invited on a shiver.

In that space of time, the girl was silent all the way.

Each and every second increased the silent pressure pressing down on his back. This was his limit.

“Got it, I’ll go and catch a monkey!” The moment Cleo ran his mouth—

“Then what are you capable of?” the girl said.

“Huh...”

When he timidly raised his head, the young girl’s cold, harsh eyes lorded over him.

“What is it you can do?” said her eyes: ‘If it’s something boring, I’ll kill and eat you this instant.’

(What... can I do...?)

He asked himself.

This girl wouldn't permit anything superficial.

A flash of inspiration suddenly struck him.

"Umm, I'm just asking for reference' sake, but... do you have any interest in swords?"

The girl's brow convulsed in a twitch.

"Sword, you mean those cutting things... what about them?"

"No, I mean... if you had to choose between like and dislike, which side would you fall under?"

"I loathe them!!"

The girl's harsh cry shook the atmosphere.

"Just look at this! It really hurt, I tell you! I detest all swords, and the people who hold them! They're irritating just to look at!"

She clamored with enough momentum to breathe fire, holding out her upper left arm, "Right here, right here!" she pointed with her finger. On closer inspection, a fresh wound that had only just closed itself had been carved in. The girl tapered her lips, casually muttering something terrifying.

"It got to my head so hard, I ate 'm without killing 'm first."

Cleo's cheeks stiffened as he shoved the slight protrusion of the adamantite sword's pommel deep into the mouth of the rucksack behind his back. Luckily, the girl was too entranced in her recollected rage to notice Cleo's suspicious movements.

He thought perhaps she would let him off if he presented one of the few adamantite swords in the world, but that was undoubtedly mistaken. In that case, there was no further need to think. There was only one thing left the current Cleo was capable of.

"Umm... then... I'll paint a picture."

It wasn't as if he had enough confidence to stick out his chest.

Still, these past few years, painting had been everything to Cleo. If that didn't work out,

there wasn't a single thing that Cleo could do.

The girl who had folded her arms, breathing roughly with her nose, returned to her senses on Cleo's words.

"...Paint a picture...?"

She stared fixedly at Cleo.

A deep wrinkle was carved into her brow. Her grim gaze pierced through him.

So it's hopeless, thought he. But, "What... is a picture?" that was the reason for the crease in her brow.

"Huh?... umm, you don't know what a picture is?"

Shaking her long hair thrice, the girl refuted it.

"No, I do not."

How would he explain it to someone who didn't know pictures? Cleo troubled his head, but without need to think, he immediately noticed.

"Wait... wait just a moment."

Suppressing the girl's thirst for knowledge with his right hand, he pulled his paint set out of his bag. Of course, concealing it with his body, so the adamantite swords wasn't spotted.

(Let's see... this should do it.)

His eyes locked onto a flower swaying by his feet. Its name escaped him, but that didn't matter. Flipping open the sketchbook, he fiercely raced his pencil. Just what had he started? The magic beast girl looked down over Cleo with intrigued eyes.

On the drawing paper, simple shapes had been put together to depict the general form and set the composition. The shape of the leaves, the number of petals, the bright spots, the dark spots—observation would increase the lines bit by bit, before erasing them still. Cleo's right arm moved without stagnation, elevating the precision of the drawing.

Around five minutes later, a rough sketch that tentatively fit the part was drawn up. Normally, he would want to put more work into it, but if he kept the girl waiting until her interests waned, then all would be lost.

He timidly held out the sketchbook.

“Err... this is a picture.”

To explain to someone who didn’t know a picture, showing them a picture was surely the best option. The girl silently accepted it.

Fearing her reaction, Cleo waited patiently with his head down.

Silence.

The girl didn’t say anything. Squatting down, she compared the picture with the real article a number of times.

“Ah...”

Her eyes opening wide, the girl cried out.

“Amazing! It’s the same! This and that flower are the same!”

She slapped her hand against the paper, and tried flipping over the sketchbook page.

“When it’s so flat, it looks like it has depth. How mysterious! How fun!”

She held the drawing up high to the summer sun. Twirling in circles, she gazed at it from various angles. Like the pleasant roll of a bell, she chimed out in laughter.

The young girl held the sketchbook to her chest, gazing at Cleo with sparkling eyes.

“Hey, hey, can I have this? Hey?”

The small tilt of her head was lovable enough to forget she was a magic beast.

The sensation of heat swiftly spread across Cleo’s cheeks.

“Yeah, umm... I-I’ll give that drawing to you. But, and this is only if you’re okay with it,

should I draw a picture of you too...?"

"Eh? Me? I can also... like this?"

The girl looked between the drawing and herself. Cleo showed a smile.

Her body trembled in delight.

"Oh yes, please do! Go ahead and, what was it—draw me!"

Up and down, but by bit, her head nodded. The flower on her head trembled with it. The vines that grew from her back squirmed as if they were trembling in anticipation.

3

Swiish, scratch, swish.

The pencil nimbly glides over the drawing paper.

The sounds come to a stop. Cleo leaks a sigh of anguish.

The girl's tendril still remains around his leg. But to the current Cleo, that was inconsequential. His worries lay in the drawing lain out before him.

(Why did I... say I would paint her...)

He could have simply done the scenery. Or perhaps a monster in the forest. If it was any manner of lifeform in his illustrated encyclopedia, he was confident he could paint them from start to finish.

The drawing paper was largely filled in with lines. The girl who had rested her hips on the grass, the sketch of the trees in the background, the thicket. But her upper body was still rough, he had postponed penciling in any of the finer details.

(I have to see to draw. Therefore I have to see...)

(I'm seeing to draw. There is by no means anything indecent about it...)

A looping self-defense.

Cleo hardened his resolve, it was finally time to lift his head.

The young girl's narrow waist, her white radiant skin, and—bit by bit, it entered his eyes. His heart pounded several times harder than the first time he saw a nude drawing.

Her long bangs that extended past the bottom of her chin, a small mouth that made it impossible to imagine she ate humans, and an innocent smile. Their eyes met. He hurriedly hid his face.

The young girl's eyes rounded curiously.

“Yey, your face suddenly turned red. Did something happen?”

“Yes, well... it's, it's, it's nothing.”

Cleo replied in a squeak, only making her tilt her head more.

Whatever the case, it won't end unless I draw. Frantically containing the tremor in his left hand, he challenged his first nude form of a woman. Just a little more into the drawing, his hand stopped. He used his eraser to rub out the lines that had shaken too much, and overlay them with new ones. There was a time he had sketched the goddess statue that stood in the fountain, and recalling that experience, he begun drawing more skillfully than he had expected.

But the problem was—the breasts, after all.

Inspecting them despite his flushed face, he tried to depict them just as they were, but that wasn't working out for him. The gentle slope of the upper portion, the flank that gave off a sense of depth, the lower curvature with a spring, hanging by the influence of gravity, each part seamlessly conjoined with the next, making for a complicated curve. Reproducing it on paper was far more troublesome work than he had anticipated.

Drawing line, erasing, and drawing again.

even when he got the feeling he was drawing well, another look, and some part of it was off. His heart didn't beat as it did when he saw naked paintings in the past. The thought that he shouldn't be looking, but the sort of attraction that made him want to look anywhere didn't exist in these lines.

(That's not how it is. This is no good at all.)

Erase and draw, repeat once more.

While Cleo hadn't noticed it, his face was no longer a shade of red. He unabashedly showered his gaze on the young girl's chest. Forgetting his awkwardness and embarrassment, to simply copy down the beautiful sight before his eyes precisely as it was, the simple passions of a painter took control of him.

Meanwhile, the girl watched Cleo as well. She was perplexed by the sudden change that had come over him. As if the way he nervously let his eyes swim around had been a lie, as if he was a different person entirely.

Digging up her memories, she recalled the faces of the people she preyed upon before. There were those whose faces warped in fear, who wept as they pleaded for their lives. There were those who grinned, as if already convinced of their victory. There were those who cried, "How dare you do that to my comrade!" glaring at the girl with eyes blazing in rage.

Cleo's gaze differed from all of them.

Serious to such a degree, but without the slightest bit of hostility resting within. Yet, be that as it may, a strong look... it was the first time she had been looked at with such eyes.



From the depths of her heart came the faint throb of a feeling she had yet to experience, perplexing her. The parts he stared at began to feel itchy and ticklish.

“Hey, I’m starting to feel strange... what is this?”

A voice resounded in her head.

‘What sort of strange feeling? Do you feel bad?’

The young girl tilted her head.

“...I don’t really know, but I don’t feel bad.”

‘I see... then it’s not that your body is in bad condition. In that case, I don’t know either. All I know is what is necessary for you to live.’

That voice was the ‘voice’ that would teach the girl various things. How to use words to lure humans in, about the animals that possessed poison, about how to survive the harsh winter. As long as she obeyed the voice, the girl could live with no problem at all.

If the voice said it didn’t know, there was no way she would herself. She gave up, secretly scratching the area under her collarbone again.

(Even so... how long is this going to take?)

She stifled the yawn rising up in her mouth. She wanted to stretch out as far as her body would take her, but before he began drawing, the boy told her, “Please don’t move too much if you can help it,” so she firmly endured.

While noon had gone by, the summer sunlight showed no signs of decline. It was a heat a human might find somewhat unpleasant, but to a magic beast like the girl, it was just the right temperature. The girl’s neck naturally swayed front and back.

(He said not to move, but what about sleeping...)

With a nod and another, she quietly dozed off.

In the distance, she got the feeling she heard a bird take flight from a tree. At the end of its flight—

How long had passed since Cleo had begun to draw? By the time he noticed it, the air had grown just a little cooler. The fact he had gotten around to noticing the changes around him could also be attributed to his concentration cutting off. On top of that, it seemed he had caught a cold, as his head was clad in heat, while his entire body enveloped in a washed-out sensation. Come to think of it, he hadn't gotten any decent sleep or means since the night before.

Cleo shut his eyes tight, rubbing and easing them with his fingers over his eyelids. He wrung out his remaining vitality to carry his brush. Dedicating his sight to the painting as a whole, he scrupulously checked the drawing paper from corner to corner. Holding it aloft to the light, He looked through it from the back. No problem.

(Alright... it's complete.)

He stretched out, experiencing a self of accomplishment at the pleasant feeling of spreading out his spine.

(Now then... the girl is, still asleep I see.)

Gazing up as he cleaned up after himself, he saw the girl loudly sounding her nose as she slept in a sitting position. She showed not the slightest sign of waking.

(And it looks like these tentacles don't go loose when she's asleep...)

The vine that served as his shackle remained firmly tangled around his leg.

(I wonder if it's like how a sleeping bird doesn't fall from the tree. Well, so be it. Whatever the case, I've got to get her up.)

Looking at her gently smiling sleeping face, he felt it unbearable he had to wake her. But his heart decided, he raised his voice.

"Umm... excuse me, the picture is finished..."

".....Zzz."

He was replied to in sleeping breath.

“Ummm...”

“.....Zzz.”

This wasn't getting him anywhere. This time, he took in a deep breath to go at it in an even louder voice. The girl's shoulders twitched. Her drowsy eyes slowly opened.

“E-erm, I'm sorry for waking you. But...”

The girl remained dazed out a while, but eventually, she looked at Cleo with a sudden realization.

“Ah... hey, are you finished?”

“Yes, I've done it.”

Carefully severing the page from the sketchbook, he handed it over. One of her vines accepted it. Holding it in complete view, she raised a cry of delight.

“Wow... it's different than the last one. The color, it's the same color!”

While the background had been completed in color much like the last one, only the girl's section had been colored in. He had intended to hand over a monochrome pencil sketch at first. But in the time he wasn't looking, the girl had dozed off, and in that case, he thought it would be fine if he put some more time into it.

The girl grasped a bundle of her green hair, and checked it beside the picture.

“The same color!” Delighted, she smiled from ear to ear. Tracing over the lines with her fingertip, she confirmed them all one by one.

“My hair... my hand... my face... hey, is this really what my face looks like?”

“Eh? Well, that's about right... I'd think so... yes.”

By putting emphasis on her slanted sharp eyes, Cleo boasted he'd done well in capturing her essence.

“This is me...”

She narrowed her eyes, wringing her throat an ukukukuh. It did seem she gave it quite a high appraisal.

“So is it to your liking...?”

“Yes of course! I like it a lot!”

“Then...”

“Mmn? Oh, yep, I won’t eat you.”

Those were the words I wanted to hear! Cleo cried in his heart, entrusting his body to a refreshing lethargy. The next instant, he could suddenly stand no longer, toppling face up in no time. The grass gently caught his body. A pleasant feel as if he had spread himself over a fluffy bed.

(I’m saved... am I.)

The moment he relaxed, his fatigue, hunger, and sleepiness launched a joint assault. His mind hazy, even if he wanted to stand, he couldn’t quite get any power into his arms or legs.

“Huh? What’s wrong?” The girl raised a voice of surprise.

“...I’m fine. I’m just a little tired...”

He said, despite knowing of his body’s grand protest for sleep this very instant. He tried testing out the feeling by closing his eyes, his consciousness receded at an incredible pace. How irresistibly comfortable.

The voice in his heart warned him he shouldn’t fall asleep in such a place, but it wouldn’t tell him why. His awareness was on the verge of melting away.

(Ten seconds. Once ten seconds pass, I’ll open my eyes and get up...)

Swearing so in the remaining fragment of his rationality, Cleo slowly began counting to ten.

One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... Seven... Eight... Nnnnnn.....

When Cleo leisurely opened his eyes, the sky was black.

The colors of evening hadn't begun to set when he closed them, yet by the time he noticed it, the area had completely gone dark. That being the case, he wasn't somewhere surrounded by trees, so it didn't go as far as pitch black. The sky he gaze up at sparsely dotted with stars.

His head gradually growing clearer, he finally recalled he had left off in a critical situation.

(...I fell asleep. Oh god!)

I have to hurry and hide myself from the beasts that lurk at night!

He tried to get up, forcefully pressing both his hands against the ground.

But.

Only his left hand made contact. Without touching a thing, his right futilely pierced through the air. Uncomprehensive, he rotated his body clockwise. After a sensation of floating in the air, a hair-raising feeling of speed assailed him.

He instinctively understand. At this very moment, he was falling. A scream gushed out into the forest's quiet; but right after, Cleo's body came to a sudden stop. Something was eating into his leg. Fastening his body in place, it smoothly lifted him up. A while later, he was slowly lowered onto the rugged ground.

"That was a surprise. You're a terrible sleeper."

In the dimness, the magic beast girl was laughing.

Clinging to the ground like a frog, Cleo warily peered into the place he was about to fall.

At the end of his vision, far below, he could see the tops of the trees. The black shadows of the trees, like the sediment gathered in a bog, expanded out as far as he his eyes

could take him.

Meaning Cleo was sleeping on the edge of a sheer cliff. Making a guess on the size of the trees he could see right below, there seemed to be a considerable distance to the ground below. A fall would surely mean instant death. His whole body shaking, he leaked the shriek of a mosquito. Still flat on his stomach, he drew himself back.

"I took you along. You wouldn't wake up when I shook you," said the girl. Cleo saw his rucksack also lay nearby.

"Then you carried me...? Um, where is..."

A cliff's edge spread out, it was a space just about large enough to comfortably erect a small house. The girl spread out both her arms wide and spoke.

"This is, you see, it's my favorite spot. It's my place!"

"Your place... and why am I here?"

"As thanks for the drawing. I've taken a liking to you, so it's special. Look over there. It's about to get really pretty."

The girl pointed out her finger, she pointed out the mountains towering over the distance. And Cleo finally noticed. The sky had evidently grown brighter than it had been before. The stars hazily faded away.

(So it wasn't evening, it was just before sunrise...)

The sky, the clouds dyed a shade of red.

The glimmering golden sun revealed itself, bit by bit, along the edge of the mountain. A light ray pierced into Cleo's eyes. The impact reached as far as his brain, making him lose his words. A while later, the sentence that finally formed in his head was a simple one indeed.

(Pretty... it really is pretty... breathtaking.)

Wonderous, he felt as if he had taken a peek into the worlds of the gods that appeared in myth. Eventually, the ball of fire showed itself in its entirety, illuminating the world. The black forest that had been akin to the depths of a bog shone in emerald green.

The morning had come.

“See?” The girl said. “It was pretty, right?”

“...Yes, very much so...” Cleo muttered, overwhelmed by the scenery before his eyes.

The sequence he had just witnessed repeated in his head, burning itself into his heart’s depths. The dramatic instant like the moment a chrysalis is reborn as a butterfly, to someday seal it on his canvas.

“Right? Yep, yep.” The girl spread a smile along her face, pointing at one of the mountains that garnished the giant panorama.

“Not too long ago, I lived around there. There’s a really pretty lake. But when I went on a long walk searching for prey, I found this spot. It was really, really pretty, and I took a liking to it, so I made it my place.”

And ukukukuh, the girl laughed.

The sun to her back, she began taking deep breaths.

Ssss... haaaa...

Ssss... haaaa...

Her verdant hair restlessly swayed.



“Ffffh, plenty of sun today, my body is full of energy.”

She comfortably stretched out.

Looking up at her unpreparedly, Cleo ended up glancing at the chest that rose and fell in accordance with her breath. He hurriedly covered his eyes.

“Mn... what’s wrong?” asked the girl.

As Cleo’s mouth holed up, his body answered with the rumble of his stomach.

(Come to think of it, I haven’t eaten anything for a whole day.)

The moment he thought it, a vehement hunger assailed him.

“Sorry, umm... I’m famished...”

“Oh, what, so that’s what it is.”

The girl reached out a vine from her back, groping around in the leaves of a nearby tree. Grasping something, she presented it out before Cleo.

“Yes, here you go. It’s good.”

She dropped it right into Cleo’s hands, which he had held out like a beggar. It was an orange tree fruit. All the fruits Cleo had eaten in his life were either cleanly peeled and sliced, or used as an ingredient for a cake or something of the sort. With one handed to him raw, just what was he supposed to do?

Cleo mulled.

(I have to peel off the skin, don’t I. But I don’t have a knife. I can’t use the adamantite sword in front of this girl... fine, I’ll use my hands.)

Plucking the stem, he stuck his thumb into the hole it left. Fruit juice and the smell of citrus relentlessly burst out. Pulling back the tender, thick skin, he timidly brought a segment towards his mouth—it was sweeter than expected. But sour. Saliva jetted into his mouth.

“...It’s delicious!”

“Right?” The girl gave a satisfied smile. Picking another with a vine, she ate it herself. Unlike Cleo, after peeling off the outside skin, she took a bite right into the whole. Thought the area around her mouth grew sticky with the juices, she paid it no mind.

Strangely enough, while the two of them were eating the same food, it birthed a strange sense of novelty. Cleo knew if he wanted to say it, this was the right time.

“Umm, I do feel sorry for asking when you’ve even treated me to fruit, but I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Eh? Yeah, what?”

“I want you to lead me to the outside of the forest. I’ll get lost alone, and I doubt I’ll be able to make it out...”

“Outside the forest? Is there something special there?”

“No, um, that’s not what I meant. If I get out of the forest, somehow or another I think I’ll be able to make it back home alone.”

“Back home? You want to return to your place?”

The girl’s eyes fixed on Cleo.

“Yes. If you’ll hear my plea.”

There, the girl grinned and spoke indifferently.

“Then no.”

The unexpected reply turned the insides of Cleo’s head white.

He felt an illusion as if time had stopped. His eyes blinking, he stood on the spot.

A gust of wind past him by. He was sure she would readily accept. That was the sort of mood.

“...Huh... no...?”

“I think I really like you. So you can’t go away.”

The binding on his leg tightened. He recalled how her vines acted as the fetter on a prisoner.

“If you run, I’ll eat you.”

As she cinched it without hesitation, Cleo powerlessly sat on the ground. It wasn’t as if he particularly wanted to go home. All that awaited him there were his aunt and uncle who approached him overfamiliarly, and Marcus’ cynicism.

But that didn’t mean he had no problems with living like this as the girl’s fond pet.

More than that, he was dealing with a magic beast. While she liked him now, there was a high probability that come tomorrow, “I’ve grown tired of you,” she might say and eat him.

(Then... what do I do? All or nothing, do I devise a plan to sever this tentacle with the adamantite sword and escape?)

And then he’d be wandering the forest alone again.

Cowering in the shadows of carnivorous beasts, not knowing where to turn.

(Unless a miracle happens, it doesn’t look like I’ll be leaving this forest alive... yeah, just what am I supposed to do?)

As Cleo held his head in his hands, something was held out before him.

The same sort of fruit from before.

“Are you alright? Do you want another?”

The girl looked at him with anxious eyes.

(Is she worried about me...?)

While she was a magic beast, it seemed that like humans, she held the capacity to sympathize with those in pain.

(No... perhaps she actually has a kinder nature than anyone back at the estate.)

Cleo thought. For now, let's keep watch of the state of affairs.

It didn't look like she would be eating him tomorrow or the day after.

There was a possibility she would eventually grow tired. But at that time, perhaps she would lead him out of the forest like a human might release the pet they can no longer keep into the wild. Cleo placed the fruit he had been given on the ground, stood and corrected his posture.

"Then I have another request, could you hear it out...?"

Perhaps perceiving the weight of the request from Cleo's renewed attitude, the girl furrowed her brow and readied herself.

"Another... what is it?"

Cleo opened the mouth of the rucksack behind him, swiftly holding the item he took out towards the girl. His raincoat.

"Could you... please wear this?"

Sing to the Moon

1

It was the continuation of the dream the night before

A nine-year-old Cleo was sketching towards the flower bed in the courtyard, when suddenly a bright voice called out from behind him.

“It’s been a while since I last saw the young master paint. Did they finally give permission?”

It was the gardener employed by the Grant House, Joseph.

Joseph was tall in stature, muscular to an extent one couldn’t believe he had passed sixty years of age. While his facial features spoke craftsman more than anything, when his tense expression loosened, it had a vague charm to it.

Cleo liked Joseph. To the boy who had lost his mother, Joseph was the only one he could open his heart to. While their ages were largely apart, Cleo thought of him as a friend; albeit, right now, his cheerful smile was mildly getting on his nerves. Flipping his sketchbook, he continued showing the gardener his back as he moved his pencil with a blunt reply.

“You remember my little brother was born last week. And then the home tutors stopped coming. Father, you see, he told me, ‘you don’t have to study anymore’. ‘Just do whatever you want’ he said.”

Cleo stopped his pencil, connecting his words.

“Father doesn’t need me anymore. Now, unlike me, he’s got a healthy, energetic, splendid successor.”

While Joseph was supposed to be standing behind him, he didn’t say a word. Even if Cleo didn’t see he could tell. At times like these, Joseph would make eyes even sadder

than his own, his mouth bent sharply into a frown.

Cleo's pencil set forth again. A while later, Joseph finally opened his mouth.

"Young master... did you want to succeed the house?"

"...No, not at all."

"In that case," Joseph said in a voice so cheerful, it was surely intentional. "This may be for the best. With this, there's nothing stopping you from becoming an artist."

"...There's no way I could be an artist."

"Don't sell yourself short. I'm an amateur when it comes to art, but I'm sure you'll be able to become a splendid—"

"I heard them talking."

"...About what."

"It's not like the kid's going to make it to twenty, they said."

The next instant, Joseph's tone changed to rage.

"Who the hell said that!?"

When he turned, eyes more fiery than magma glared at him.

In contrast, with a look of ice, Cleo spoke coldly.

"—Father."

Joseph lost his words.

He was dumbfounded. But his face wasn't one to say, "That's idiotic," "There's no way that's true". Vexed, on the verge of tears, as if he had ended up hearing a secret that should have been concealed no matter what, it was that sort of face. For his real father to suppose his expiration of all things...

"...What, so you knew about it too."

“N-no... I, well...”

Joseph apologetically turned away his eyes.

He was an honest man. He had never once lied to Cleo. He wouldn't tell him “That's mistaken,” or “I never heard about that from the master”.

But he did say this.

“Young master... there's something I want to show you. Please wait here a moment.”

And Joseph ran off without waiting for a reply.

Ten minutes later, he returned dripping with sweat. In his arms rising in breath, he held a flowerpot containing a form of vegetation Cleo had never seen before.

“Young master, do you know what this is?”

Cleo shook his head. If he had to describe its form as he saw it, it looked like a green-colored ball. And radiating from its summit, countless sharp thorns sprouted as if to intimidate all those who drew close.

It was the first time he had seen such a peculiar form of plant life. But Cleo did have an idea.

“Is that... a cactus?”

“Right, that's correct! I'm surprised you knew.” Joseph raised his voice in admiration.

“...I saw it in the encyclopedia. But the picture it showed wasn't this round. A cactus is a rare plant in this area, right?”

“You got that right. The other day an old friend of mine brought this one back from a trip. By the way, young master, while it might look so scary, it properly gives flowers you know. Was that also in the encyclopedia?”

“Umm... yeah, I don't know about that. I don't really remember. But if it's a plant, isn't it normal to have flowers?”

“Well, that's normally the case.”

Joseph squatted down beside Cleo.

“But see, this one isn’t normal up to the point it flowers... listen to this, it takes a whole thirty years”



“Thirty years? Really?”

As Cleo’s eyes rounded in surprise, Joseph grinned as if to say he was waiting for that.

“Well, it’s not as if I’ve seen it with these eyes, but I was thinking I’d raise ‘m up and confirm it.”

“.....Hmmm...”

As Cleo gave the cactus a long, hard stare, “Take a closer look,” Joseph brought the flower pot closer. With each and every pointed spoke closing in before his eyes, he ended up pulling his body back with a start.

“It’s not gonna hurt you,” Joseph gave a grand laugh.

“Still, I’m sure this cactus can’t even dream of the day its flower blooms. And thirty years go by until one day, it notices it had a flower after all. I’m sure that’s got to be a surprise.”

Imagining a surprised cactus, Cleo giggled. Joseph smiled back.

“But you know, young master. It’s the same with us humans. Where we’ll be in ten, twenty years, no one really knows. Of course, even the master–”

Understanding what he was trying to say, the small smile floating over Cleo’s face vanished. He hung his head to gaze at his muddy shoes beneath him.

“In the or twenty years... I could still be alive...?”

“Like hell anyone can declare you won’t be. It’s all an unknown. Especially when it comes to how we live and die. Someone who’s living it up all the way to yesterday can drop right off on his way today. But the opposite can happen too.”

Joseph’s gaze of reminiscence was sucked into the deep blue summer sky.

“But, and this is the kicker, just because you don’t know what’ll happen tomorrow, I don’t think that means today, you just have to have your fun here and now. For instance, food is tastier the more time you put into it, right? Try putting the happiness you get in one day up against a week, a month, a year, a decade, compared to the happiness you can only get by piling it up, it’s not going to amount to much.”

And Joseph spoke, his gaze remaining trailed on the distant sky.

“That’s why, young master. For we humans, it’s all about living long. Live a long life, and the day the flower blooms will come.”

Cleo continued gazing at his shoes as he asked.

“.....Really...”

It wasn’t that he doubted Joseph. But if his words were true, what about his mother? Could it be the happiness of his mother who couldn’t live long ‘not amount to much’?

That wasn’t something Cleo could bring himself to say. If he did, he was sure Joseph would make a sad face again.

“...Is that really true?”

Joseph turned back to Cleo, making that charming smile as he spoke.

“Of course it is!”

And in the fall of last year, Joseph was among those who fell to illness, past the point of no return. Without having the chance to see the cactus’s flower—

2

His eyes snapping open, when he confirmed the night had yet to open, Cleo leaked a sigh. Good grief. Tonight, he was unable to fall into a deep sleep, he woke time and again. Surely, he was too high strung.

Today, or perhaps it was yesterday by now, but whatever the case, it was a hectic day.

After he got the girl to wear the raincoat, the two of them walked through the forest. The girl’s appetite couldn’t be sated with two or three fruits. In search of more-filling forms of prey, she said her days were spent wandering the forest.

“Well, I can barely live on with just mr. sun’s light and water. So when I really don’t feel up to it, I just spend my eyes lounging around where the sun hits just right.”

But in order to run, or fight to protect herself, she would need a proper meal lest she be rendered powerless, apparently. In order for the girl to live in the survival of the fittest world of nature, she would need to keep a sufficient supply of nutrients on a daily basis. That's why she would go to the forest for prey. His leg still tangled by the bine, Cleo would have to follow after her no matter how far she went.

After walking around two hours, they came upon a five-horned deer parent and child. The parent ran away, but she managed to capture the child. Restraining the violently struggling fawn with her vine, after strangling its neck to finish it off, the young girl reached out towards one of her captured prey's hind legs and—ripped it off bare-handed. The show of brute strength unimaginable from her delicate build cause Cleo to wince and open his eyes wide.

The young girl gleefully bit into the flesh, moving her mouth to chew before swallowing it down. She bit down again, ripping the meat off of the bone. Her mouth was dyed red, she gave a sweet smile as, "Yes, here you go," she handed over a cut of meat. The scent of blood pricking into his nasal cavity. Cleo felt a sense of vertigo, following onto his vertigo, retreating back with his knees still given out.

"I, I, I, I, I'm fine."

"You don't need it? It's really delicious."

Tilting her head, she indulged some more, her appetite for the day sated for the time being.

But it wasn't over yet.

After that, the girl started a pilgrimage around her favorite spots, dragging him around until darkness fell. By the time she finally returned to her place, the 'Cliff with Pretty Sunrise', the pitch-black sky flickered with stars.

Near the cliff, was the trunk of a great tree, hollowed out by insects. The girl stuck her hand into the crevice running down the tree, spreading it wide with her monstrous strength. Soon, she had made an entrance wide enough for Cleo's body to barely pass through vertically.

"Yes, then from today onwards, you'll sleep here."

It was a human house not fit for a dog. The inside was just fast enough for him to

spread out his legs and sleep. While he did get the feeling his dignity as a human was being slighted, he was tired to death, so it didn't really matter anymore. Slipping into his sleeping bag, he left his body to his distancing consciousness, soon falling to sleep.

And yet, for some reason, a little while later, he had opened his eyes. In his cycle of sleep and wake, his head grew clearer and clearer. The inside of his sleeping bag had grown unbearably sultry.

Cleo undid the fastener and stuck his arms and legs out from the bag. The light coating of sweat vaporize, making for a pleasant cool. Stretching out his curdling body—and it was then.

The young girl's vine around his ankle, as if gently tickling his foot, smoothly slipped off. It gave a small sound as it fell to the floor.

(.....huh, what's this? What's that supposed to mean?)

At this unexpected development, he forgot how to blink as he stared in a daze.

That state continued five minutes, the hooting of a distant owl finally returning Cleo to his senses. He timidly called out to the girl who should be outside the tree.

"...Umm, it came off, you know...?"

He waited a while. He waited until,

Zzzzz...

The girl returned a breath for a response.

Cleo stifled his breath to peek his head out the crevice. The moonlight poured in through the gaps in the overlapping leaves and branches, gently illuminating the ground. At the base of a tree around two to three meters away, a shadow propped up against the trunk. It was the girl.

Zz, zzzz...

She did seem to be sound asleep. Corresponding with her breath, her shadow lightly swayed.

A terrifying sensation raced down Cleo's spine.

(I can get away now...?)

3

Just as a dog or cat may dream, so too did the magical beast girl.

She was at the lake that once served as her dwelling.

On the water's surface around ten meters from shore, for some reason, a single tree stuck out. There was a single monkey at the top of the tree, hitting its hands together to intimidate her. Today's the day I catch you. The girl extended out the vines from her back. At that moment, the boy who drew pictures appeared from nowhere in particular, putting the stops on her attempt.

"That's a false-monkey you know. It looks like a monkey from every angle, but it's actually friends with the fish. If you approach it carelessly, it will run away into the lake."

"Oh, so that's a fish, hmm..." she opened her eyes wide.

"But even if it isn't a monkey, I'd like to try a taste. Is there a good way to do it?"

The boy hit at his chest as if telling her to leave it to him.

"If you shout 'Boo!' in a loud voice to startle it, the false-monkey will shout out 'Wah!' and open its mouth in surprise. Then into its mouth—" before she noticed it, the area was populated with piles of stone. The boy gripped a good-sized rock in hand.

"You throw in its throne. If you do that a great many times, the false-monkey won't be able to move anymore from the weight of the rocks, and you can catch it with no difficulty at all."

"I see, that's brilliant!"

The girl's heart soared, she nodded a number of times. She would get right to it. Cupping the palms of her hand around her mouth, the girl menacingly cried out,

“Boo!”. When she did, rather than startled, the monkey defenselessly held its mouth open like a chick waiting to be fed. Within it, the stone the young boy threw was sucked in. The girl raised a cry of delight. The boy picked up the next stone.

“Now let’s keep at it, shall we!”

The false-monkey’s stomach visibly expanded with each stone it swallowed down. Eventually unable to bear the weight, the false-monkey missed its footing and fell. While it was caught by a branch growing below it, its body was tangled up and it was unable to move

“Hooray!” Two voices overlapped. Wrapping the false-monkey that could no longer move in her vines, she dragged it all the way to shore. When she held it upside, a great many stones were spat from the false-monkey’s mouth. She shook it up and down, again and again, until the last one was out.

Lunchtime came without delay.

The young girl ate the legs, the boy at the arms. The first monkey— rather false-monkey she had eaten was a peculiar taste she had never experienced before

“It’s delicious.”

“It really is.”

Blood all around their mouths, the two smacked their lips at the curious yet delicate flavor.

The girl only learned it when she met the boy, but eating together with someone was tastier than eating alone, and more fun to boot.

Ukukukufufuh.

A laugh bubbled up from the depths of her throat. The boy laughed too. They had mostly eaten everything. “Now all that’s left is to split the brain half and half,” she was about to say when an impact brought the girl’s dream to a sudden end.

“...!”

When she opened her eyes, she wasn't by the bank of the river. The half-eaten false-monkey was nowhere to be seen. Before her eyes was the grand tree the human she captured was using as a bed. The faint sliver of the sky she could see was still dark. The twinkling stars peeked in here and there.

"...What's this, so it was just a dream."

Nothing to do with any past memories, an absurd and incoherent dream. The girl had been sleeping resting against the base of a tree, but her torso had slipped and fallen, and it seemed the impact had woken her.

The girl gave a sigh, and smiled just a bit.

(What a strange dream. But it was fun.)

I'll have to catch a real monkey someday, and then I'll let that human eat some too. As the girl thought so, the voice in her head resounded. The voice that would offer her various bits of wisdom.

'Hey, it came off.'

"Eh? What did?"

Perhaps because she was half asleep, she had no idea what the voice was referring to. Shaking a bit as her mouth opened wide for a yawn, she let out a light breath at the end.

"...It came off...?"

When she tilted her head, the voice spoke in a tone with no emotion behind it.

'I said the vine binding that human came off.'

"....."

In her slowly spinning head, it took some time to comprehend what the voice had said.

".....What!?"

She concentrated her attention on the vine that was supposed to be binding him. She

definitely didn't feel the sensation of it gripping anything. When she tugged at it with all her might, the tip of the vine shot out of the tree's crevice without catching on anything.

She frantically crawled over, peering into the rift. Her eyes worked as well as a nocturnal animal. But the inside was an empty shell.

'He ran away,' The voice indifferently informed her as if it were someone else's business. Meanwhile, the insides of the girl's head spun wildly like it had been swallowed in a stormy sea.

"Ran... w-why would he do that?"

'The human said it, didn't he? That he wanted to return to his place outside the forest. Isn't that why he ran away?'

"That can't be! I mean..."

He definitely did say it. However, "But I plucked fruit and gave it to him. We ate together, and I even took him around to see all my favorite places... and yet! When it was so fun!"

'They're not the sort of lifeform that'll take to you just because you looked after them a bit, those humans. And while it may have been fun for you, there's no way of telling the human thought the same.'

"Wai... what do you mean? I-I was the only one having fun... is that how it is?"

'Who knows. You might have been.'

"No way..."

She was astonished, she felt as if she'd been betrayed. It was the first time she'd experienced it from birth. An intense shock and confusion mercilessly attacked and condemned the young girl.

Feeling a dizziness as if the world was spinning around her, she touched her hand to the tree trunk. Her slender arm shook in anguish.

"I... I..."

A faint voice that might drop off at any moment. The next instant, her pale fingers circled into a hook, her sharp claws stuck into the tree's surface, scratching against it as if to gouge it out.

Five gashes deeply carved in.

Her shoulders, her voice, as if jolted by the suddenly serving emotion, were quivering.

"I'm... not going to allow it...!"

Her green eyes glowed eerily in the darkness.

"I'll definitely find him, I'll catch him..."

'I doubt that human could traverse the night's forest so quickly. He shouldn't be too far away.'

"When I catch him... I'll eat him on the spot!"

Ruled by a magic beast's impulse, the girl howled like a dragon breathing fire.

With the eyes of a hawk searching for pray, she searched for the escaped boy's traces. And it was then.

.....No human words~...

She heard a voice.

It was undoubtedly, that human's voice. What's more, it was considerably close.

(...Huh?)

'—Huh?'

No matter how she looked at it, it was unthinkable he was still so close. But what surprised her the most was the fact that his voice wasn't the voice of a fugitive.

No sense of tension, a peculiar voice with a bizarre intonation. When she heard it, her rage on the verge of eruption subsided.

(What... what's going on with that...?)

For some reason, the voice was locked in one place unmoving. The girl headed for the place it emitted from. She could hear it from the 'Cliff with Pretty Sunrise'. Right under her nose.

The Cait Sidhe with the speeectacle.

When she breached the thicket and came out onto the cliff—he was there after all.

He was sitting down and doing something, but from where she was, she could only see his back.

“And eeeverything he knooooows.”

He was still letting out a bizarre voice. The girl slowly approached his back.

4

“What are you... doing?”

While Cleo was entranced in pleasantly racing his brush, a voice was suddenly called from behind, startling him so hard he thought he might kick over the pail of water he left on the ground.

He hurriedly turned around. His eye's met with the magic beast girl's, who was making an angry, troubled, unbearably perplexed, indescribable face.

“Eh... ah... w-well...”

Even under the light of the pale moon, Cleo's face grew evidently red.

“M... my apologize, I was making a ruckus... umm... tonight, my brush was moving how

I wanted so well I couldn't believe it myself, so I couldn't help but... my apologies."

While having no one around was an absolute condition, when his brush acted up, he had a tendency to sing to himself. Tonight was the same. With the shame of having his song heard, Cleo fell into a panic, unable to answer what was asked, incoherently answering what hadn't been asked at all.

The girl ignored Cleo's words, peering down at his hands.

"You were drawing a picture?"

"...Oh, yes..."

There was a sketchbook on Cleo's lap. Heavily coated with blacks and blues, on the paint-slathered drawing paper, a glimmering pale, crescent moon had been painted. Tonight's moon.

"I couldn't seem to fall asleep... so if I wasn't sleeping anyway, I thought I might as well draw a picture..."

He timidly looked up at the girl, was he not supposed to...?

Cleo tried asking.

The When it came to the girl, she held her mouth open with her face dazed out, as stiff as an automaton whose spring had lost tension. Given a bit of time, a piercing laugh escaped her wide-open mouth. This time, Cleo's eyes and mouth opened in a daze.

The girl's flushed cheeks slackened, she spoke in a high-pitched voice.

"Told you, told you! See!"

She struck up conversation with the thin air.

"Who said he ran away? What did I tell you, god! Uku, ukuKUKUKUFUFUFUH!"

While he didn't know who she was directing those words to, Cleo could guess she thought he had tried to escape. Certainly, for around fifteen minutes after the vine slipped, run, don't run, run, don't run... his thoughts had swayed left and right. But the conclusion that escape was pointless had been hung before his eyes from the start.

Wandering a forest without even knowing what direction to run in, for the starved forest beasts, he would surely be easier game than the rats and rabbits. At present, he was only alive thanks to the young girl's patronage. A distance she could quickly span if he cried out was the limit of Cleo's freedom. There was no way he could run like that. It was clear from the start.

Now then.

Eventually, the laugh was contained, and wiping away the tears that spread from her emerald eyes, the girl spoke.

"So who were you talking to back there?"

Cleo blankly returned the question.

"Pardon?"

"You were talking in a kinda strange voice back there. K... ket sit? You said something like that."

"Ket...? O-oh, that's, well..."

Perhaps he should say, as I thought, but it did seem the girl didn't know. With the revival of the shame he had forgotten, he felt his cheeks slowly grow hotter as he answered.

"That was... a... a song."

"A song? What's that?"

He got the response he was expecting. But on the contrary, Cleo ended up tilting his head.

What exactly- is a song, anyways?

He put down his brush and crossed his arm. Furrowing his brow, he looked up at the heavens and thought. Thinking the answer lay at the end of his eyes, the girl was invited to look out into the night sky as well.

"A song is, well... you raise and lower your voice in a decided sequence... ah, rhythm is

also important but... a-anyways, you put out your voice like that...?"

It was a result he had squeezed out of his brain and full throttle, but there was no way the girl could be satisfied with an answer that ended with a question. Her somber face spoke, 'Now I understand even less'.

"And... what do you do that for? Is it necessary to paint?"

"No, it's not like it's necessary, umm... it's fun to sing a song. Thought you could also sing because you're having fun..."

".....Hmmm..."

The girl showed just a bit of an accepting nod.

"Then do it again."

"...Eh?"

"I still don't get it, but for now, I'd like to hear it again. That's fine, right? Songs are fun, right?"

How about it, her eyes urged him on. Just like a grog transfixed by a snake.

While Cleo was reserved and bashful by nature, even more than that, he was a person who couldn't say no. "You can only sing songs when you're alone," he could say as a means to escape, but he was also a terrible liar. While flustered by a sense of guilt, pressing a lie through until the girl accepted it was quite likely impossible.

(So I have no choice but to sing...)

Cleo thought, he closed his eyes.

Cutting off his field of vision, he concentrated on nothing but his own voice.

Ssss, he sucked in a breath—and finally.

The Cait Sidhe with the spectacles

Around the world he goes.

Around, he's seen all sorts of things,

and everything he knows.

Do you know what makes the sunset red?

How many stars shine in the sky?

If you ask, he'll tell you all he's heard,

So the Caid Sidhe says, Meow meeeooow meow meow.

He shakes his tail, Meeoow meow meow meow.

For the Cait Sidhe speaks no human words

In his nervousness, he arbitrarily added on a vibrato, but even so, Cleo somehow managed to get through the song. Slowly opening his eyes, he timidly peeked at the girl.

The moment their gazes overlapped, the flower of a smile bloomed across her face.

And she spoke forcefully as if she couldn't contain her excitement.

"That's a song? Amazing, singing is interesting! Just by listening, I was just listening, and yet... how mysterious! I feel like I'm having a lot of fun right now!"

Her green eyes gave off a glimmer that didn't lose to the night's moon.

"Hey, I want to do it too! What am I supposed to do? Tell me!"

Around thirty minutes later, the two of them were singing.

The girl was quick on the uptake, and just by singing along with Cleo two or three times, she had learned a majority of the lyrics and melody. The sound she made when she got to the Sidhe part of Cait Sidhe ended up coming out as off, and that habit remained to the end, but that was a challenge for another day.

On his painting, he struck in somewhat strong white dots into the sky, to scatter stars and complete it. Once various things had come to the end, like the effects of coffee wearing off, a drowsiness suddenly came unto him. As if his semicircular canals had broken down, his upper body limply swayed, and his body could no longer keep itself up straight. Cleo was about to inform her of that when he suddenly noticed.

Come to think of it, he had yet to hear the girl's name.

While she was a magic beast, it was a bit embarrassing to ask a girl's name—

"Umm, this is a bit late, but we never introduced ourselves. I'm called Cleo Grant. What's your... n-name?"

He had intended to ask nonchalantly, but he choked the last word. Earnestly concealing his building embarrassment, he laughed an ahahah as he looked up at the girl. And he noticed a change.

The young girl blankly opened her mouth, rigid as a stone statue.

Her eyes opened in perfect circles blinked, she stared intently with a curious face.

"...U-umm...?"

When he sent over a bewildered voice, the girl slowly moved her left-open mouth.

"Cleog... what?"

"Ah, yes, it's Cleo Grant. You can call me Cleo."

"So you're... a Cleo? You're not human?"

Through the gaps in her hair, he could see a wrinkle visit her brow.

“What..... oh, so that’s how it is.”

She didn’t know the concept of personal identity, Cleo understood.

“I’m uh... a human, who goes by Cleo Grant.”

“You have two names?”

“Yeaaah... let’s see, I guess that’s what it would mean. In order to distinguish each individual human was have another name, a name just for the individual. Meaning, there are lots of humans out there, but Cleo Grant is only me. It’s a name just for me.”

In actuality, there might be another out there who shared the same name, but explaining that far would simply make things more convoluted, so he purposely omitted it. A while later, the wrinkle on her forehead leisurely disappeared.

“Only one, a name just for you... Hmmm, you humans think up some interesting things.”

She did seem to understand, for argument’s sake.

“Umm, so what’s your name...?”

“Mn? Wait right there, I’ll try asking. Hey, do I have a name?”

When she said that, the girl looked as if she was staring at the top of her head, a whole half of her pupils disappearing under her upper eyelids. What was she talking about, Cleo tilted her head.

Eventually dropping her shoulders in disappointment, the girl spoke.

“I don’t have a name. She said I don’t need one.”

“Umm... w-who said that?”

“?”A blank face gazed at Cleo. “Who? Why of course... the one in your head who teaches you all sorts of things... don’t you have one in yours?”

“Oh my... no, I don’t have anyone in my head...”

When Cleo shook his head, the girl made a bit of a surprised face.

“I see, hmm. Ah, but wait a second! I’m about to remember something! That was, ummm, ummm...”

Hitting against her forehead as if she was trying to stimulate the cells in her brain, the girl groaned. Cleo prepared to head back, waiting for the girl to remember something. Eventually, she hit her hands together, making a grand proclamation.

“That’s right! Some time or another, the human called me Monster! My name is Monster!”

Having put his paint supplies away in his rucksack, Cleo felt he might topple over.

“Y-you can’t go with a name like that.”

“Eeh? Why not!”

She discontently tapered her lips.

“I mean... by which I mean to say... that’s a bad name.”

“Bad? There are good names and bad names?”

“Yes. Umm... M-Monster is what they called you with spite. I don’t want to call you by that name.”

“So that’s how it is? I see...”

She narrowed her shoulders, dangling her head forward. The flower on top drooped powerlessly. Her profile lit up by the light of the pale moon was lonesome beyond words.

That expression stimulated a man’s instincts, inviting on the desire to do something for her. Otherwise the words surely would never have escaped the timid Cleo’s voice.

“Umm, if you think up a proper name, we can go with that. But until then...” he gulped down his spit. “Would it be alright if I called you... Roselyne?”

“Roselyne?”

She raised her face and pointed at her self.

“That’s me...?”

Cleo simply nodded.

“Roselyne... is that a good name?”

For a name he came up with on the spot, he had a peculiar conviction.

“Yes. I’d like to think it’s a good name.”

“Roselyne... so I’m...”

The girl muttered, her gaze slid up her own raincoat-clad body.

The tips of her toes, her knees, her thighs, the shoulders to her hands, to the tips of her fingers. Her right, to her left, and back again.

She stuck up her index finger, and stared at it silently. Up to a moment ago, it was just an index finger. Now it was Roselyne’s index finger.

“.....!!”

A hot, numbing something raced up her spine, hit her brain head on, and gave her an impact as if the back of her head had been hit with a blunt weapon.

The young girl stared absentmindedly at her index finger.

Gazing at her, Cleo thought.

Did she like it, did she not?

Having spent an infancy that’s wounds wouldn’t fade from his heart, Cleo had a bad

habit of generally not having expectations on the result. So with upturned eyes so apologetic they could be called servile, "Um, if it's not to your liking... if it's no good, we can go with something else..." Like a timid doctor informing of something hard to say, he mumbled the words in his mouth alone.

Even so, it seemed it reached her ears, their two gazed overlapping on her index finger.

"Ah... no, it's not that I hate it or that it's no good. It's just, even if you suddenly call me Roselyne, I don't really get it."

"Is that so... umm, would a different name have been better...?"

"A different name?" Running parallel to her eyelids, her eyes carried out a full revolution.

"No, it's fine. I mean, even if you say a different one, I probably won't know which one is better."

"...Is that so. Then Roselyne it is."

"Yeah."

At her not exactly right, not exactly wrong sort of reaction, Cleo hesitated a bit.

(She could've been just a little happier, but... so be it.)

A long and large yawn leaked from Cleo's mouth. He was already at his limit.

"Umm, I'm getting sleepy, so may I retire first?"

"Eh? Oh, yeah, go right ahead. I'll be looking at the moon for a little longer."

Is that so, Cleo said with a glance at the moon. Certainly, tonight's moon was the sort of good moon that made you want to gaze at it forever.

"Then good night... Ms. Roselyne."

"Missroselyne?" The girl's gaze returned to Cleo on the earth. "It's not Roselyne?"

"Ah, no, that's..."

For a moment, he thought to give her a proper explanation of titles, but his words crushed by a yawn even more powerful than before, he got the feeling it didn't really matter.

"You're right, in that case..." Shouldering his rucksack, with the etiquette of a child born to a noble house, he gave a withdrawing bow. "Good night, Roselyne."

"Good night, umm... Cleo."

On the way back to his sleeping spot, Cleo suddenly realized. Why was it Roselyne?

Where could that flash of inspiration have come from?

The answer was simple.

(I see, Roselyne...)

The name closely resembled that of his late mother— Roselia.

6

Once Cleo had gone.

The young girl's gaze cleared the moon, to somewhere far beyond. With a look as if she was staring into the furthest depths of space, she marveled at the night sky for times to come. The voice spoke.

'Are you sure you didn't have to bind his leg?'

"Eh?... Ah, come to think of it, you're right."

The girl contemplated for just a moment.

"...Well, I'm sure it'll be fine. He didn't run away back there, did he?"

From there, she made a mischievous smile, and added on. "Even so, so even you can be wrong. He ran away, you said... Ukukukuh, ah, how peculiar."

The voice didn't answer. It was as if it had bent its mouth into a frown and was pouting.

The girl said no more, she gazed up at the moon again. A tranquil time slowly passed by. But a while later, ukukuh, her laughing voice welled up.

'Is it really so interesting to know I jumped to conclusions?'

It was the same flat tone as ever, but perhaps it gave off a sense it was forcing itself to maintain a level head.

"There's that too, but that's not it," the girl said, shaking her head with a smile. "I, you see, I'm not just me anymore, I'm Roselyne now. When I think that, see, my face just goes and smiles. In the back of my throat, ukukuh, it won't stop. What do you think's happening to me?"

She said and Ukukukuh, she laughed again. Her shoulders shook minutely. The voice plainly answered so.

'I don't know. But... you look somewhat happy.'

"Happy?" The girl garnished her slackened cheek with a hand and spent a few seconds in thought. "You're right, it looks like I'm happy. Hey, do you have a name? A name just for you!"

The girl leaned forward to draw closer. But the voice's tone didn't change.

'That is a meaningless question.'

"...What do you mean?"

'I am a portion of you. Just as each individual strand of your hair, and each of your vines has no name, so too I do not.'

The girl frowned. "?" She tilted her head. The voice continued on like a mother teaching a young child.

'In short, me and you are the same existence. Do you understand? A part of the same lifeform. Meaning it's impossible for me to have a name for me alone.'

"The same? You're the same as me?"

'That's right. Do you understand?'

“Then you’re also Roselyne? That’s no good! Roselyne is me and just me!”

The girl clenched her fist, fiercely lashing out at an opponent she couldn’t see. A breach of vested interest! A little tired out, she doesn’t get it, the voice muttered.

‘So be it. You may call me Instinct.’

“Insteen? Is that your name?”

‘That’s right. Are you satisfied now?’

The girl’s attitude easily changed. Ukukukukuh, her laugh was restored.

“Yeah. I’m Roselyne, and you’re Insteen,” Ukukuku. “But Insteen is a strange name. I’m sure it’s not as good as Roselyne.”

The girl triumphantly stuck out her chest.

‘Say whatever you want,’ The voice said and kept silent.

Perhaps she had finally grown angry. But the girl—Roselyne failed to notice, as if the half-moon glistening in the center of the sky was her audience, she began to sing the tune she had only just learned.

Her singing voice rode the wind, it spread across the night forest, and softly found its way into the ear of Cleo, who was soundly breathing a sleeper’s breath in his sleeping bag.

In the past, when he caught a cold or so, as long as he heard that song, he could fall into a peaceful slumber.



The one who would sing by his side was—his mother.

Right now, Cleo's face was at peace, as if he had regained a happiness of long ago.

The Cait Sidhe with the spectacles,

Around the world he goes—

Blue Rose

1

From the next day onwards, Cleo's morning started with a, "Morning, Cleo." And of course, "Good morning, Roselyne," he would respond.

Going out to the cliff to bathe in the morning sun, quenching her throat in a nearby stream. That was her morning daily routine. After that, she would lounge around a bit, waiting for her internal organs to start to motion before going out hunting to sate her hunger.

On days where she couldn't find any game, she had to walk so long her legs became stiff, but with good luck, she would encounter big game—for example, a plump adult boar—and if she could successfully bring it down, her stomach would be filled for two to three days. On the days she didn't have to go hunting, she would take it easy until the sunset in one of her numerous favorite spots. "Hey, tell me something interesting," Roselyne demanded, so Cleo would tell her a story from one of the books he had once read while holed away in his room.

"What's a 'king'?"

'What's a 'circus'?'

Time and again, she would break the backbone of the story, but at such times, Cleo would paint an 'illustration' to answer her question. While Roselyne didn't seem to understand the moral lessons lying in the story's depths or the niceties of the characters' sentiment, coming in contact with unknown knowledge was, in and of itself, a large joy for her. The drawing papers filled up with kings and circuses, and all other sorts of chaotic concepts would be carefully folded by her hand and tucked into the pocket of her raincoat.

Just like that, two weeks passed by in no time.

By the 'Cliff with Pretty Sunrise' Roselyne had set as her current base, the red flowers bloomed en masse. That day, Cleo was sketching one of the roses, and as a flight of fancy, he painted the rose in blue.

Untiringly watching the picture approach its completion, "Eh?" Roselyne quietly showed her surprise. "The color of the flower isn't the same. Why?"

Flowers this blue should grow in this forest, they're a very rare rose, Cleo explained.

“They’re really rare? Hmmm.”

Roselyne reacted strongly to that portion.

It’s not as if the spottings of blue roses were few in number in the world. But their spotting sites shared a commonality, and they were often in the depths of forests humans rarely set foot in. What’s more, if you tried to bring one back to grow more, once a week passes by, the blue color will drain away. Given a week, it becomes no more than an ordinary white rose. By the way, when a woman who was once a beauty completely changes in the span of only a few years, they might say, ‘She was a blue rose’.

Whatever the case, blue roses were rare. While he had no intention to take one back and succeed the Grant House, since he had come all the way there, he did think he might as well see one at least once.

(Come to think of it, Joseph did say he wanted to see a blue rose before he died.)

Cleo got the feeling by seeing a blue rose, he would be able to hold a memorial service for his late friend. He pulled his charmed compass out from his bosom and showed it to Roselyne.

“The blue roses should grow where this tool points.”

Roselyne pinched it between her thumb and index finger, turning it round and round, staring at it intently.

“So you can tell where the flower blooms in the forest with this. Hmm, that’s kinda interesting.”

Returning the compass to Cleo, Roselyne grinned and said this.

“Then how about we have a look?”

2

The first day was undoubtedly the better part.

They had departed in the afternoon, so the sun set in no time. While Roselyne held such ardor she didn’t mind searching through the night, he managed to persuade her

with the fact they couldn't check the compass at night. Worming his way into his sleeping bag, Cleo fell asleep in under a minute.

The next day, the walk began with the sun's rise.

Given a while, Cleo felt a strange load on his feet. At first, he simply tilted his head, but he eventually understood. The ground was gently sloping up.

(Let's pray it's just a small hill...!)

But the incline grew harsher and harsher, continuing on without end. It did seem that unbeknownst to them, they had endeavored to climb a mountain. His calves cramping up, Cleo quickly felt an urge to raise a sound.

On the other hand, Roselyne didn't even seem to notice the sloping ground, at times pushing through thickets, at times smashing through the lower branches of the trees and shrubs, exultantly pressing through the forest.

She pushed her way no matter how far.

She pushed, and pushed.

A little rest, and she was pushing again.

"...And then, making sure I didn't make any sound, I quietly, quietly crept up my vines. But when there was just a little more to go before I could reach that rabbit, swsh, I just barely grazed against a tree. It's no good, it's going to run away! I thought, but then... hey, are you listening?"

Roselyne came to a halt and turned around. Cleo was around three meters behind, frantically walking to keep up with her. The rucksack on his back was tacked onto an even heavier load called regret.

Teetering, with unsteady footing, he looked like he would take a tumble at any moment.

"I... I'm listening..... ah!"

The instant he wheezed out a response, he really did fall.

Roselyne stooped down, “Are you alright?” she peered into his face. Still prostrated over the ground, “Please let me rest a bit,” Cleo murmured.

Slipping off his bag and rolling onto his back, the light through the trees drew a speckled pattern over his sweat-soaked body. The points lit up were filled with a burning sensation, and Cleo didn’t hesitate to roll and roll to flee into a larger shadow. A cool, gentle breeze blew down his loose collar, causing him to leak a comfortable sigh.

“Hey, are you done yet? Let’s get going.”

In less than two or three minutes, Roselyne could wait no longer; extending her vines from the hem of the raincoat, she shook Cleo. At this rate, the vines might tie him up and drag him along the ground. Cleo shouldered his rucksack, putting fighting spirit into both his legs to stand.

In a few measly steps, his leg was caught up by a root sticking out of the ground, making him fall once again.

He heard Roselyne sigh.

His pride as a man suffering a blow, he shed just a tear. The bitter taste of sand spread through his mouth.

And there.

All of a sudden, his body was floating. The magic beast girl’s vines had wrapped around his entire body.

Fed up, tired, had she finally changed her mind and decided to eat him?

The blood drew from his face. Without even the time to raise a shriek, his body was at her mercy as it—was rested on Roselyne’s back.

Roselyne grabbed both his legs and undid the vines tangling him, placing him in a so-called piggy-back ride.

(.....Huh?)

Right before Cleo’s eyes were her profile. Her long eyelashes that would rise and fall

with each blink, like a butterfly flapping its wings. As he found his gaze fixing onto those elegant movements, Rosalyne suddenly turned towards him, their eyes meeting at extreme point-blank.

“Hey, this is the right way, right?”

“Eh—Ah, wait, wait a second.”

He hurriedly took out the compass. The direction it pointed corresponded with the direction she jerked her chin towards.

“Yes, it’s right. That way—”

By the time he noticed it, her eyes were gazing at him intently.

“Wah, what’s the matter?”

Roselyne quietly peered into his face.

“Cleo... I notice your face turns red quite often. At what times does it turn?”

“What times, well...”

Unable to say he was entranced with the side of her face, he looked away to flee.

Roselyne blinked her eyes and tilted her head.

She awaited an answer he couldn’t give. A while of silence.

Eventually, the awkwardness of perpetual silence grew unbearable. He had to say something, but should he just speak honestly? No, but... the inside of his head spun into a whirlpool. He was coming down with a fever. It was at that time that Roselyne’s voice resounded by his ear.

“Cleo, hold on tight.”

Hold on tight?

Before he could understand what she was talking about, Roselyne took off with a strong burst.

Had she been lowering pace to match his before? She was climbing that mountain at a speed that made comparisons pointless. She pressed through the forest. The trunks, the leaves, they all passed like a river flowing from front to back. Shaking as if he had been caught up in an earthquake, Cleo's body floated through the air, his brain shaking inside of his skull. He reflexively clung onto Roselyn's nape.

(Ah...)

He had noticed he was embracing her from behind with all his might.

When her appearance was so slender and well proportioned, she was pleasantly soft.

A scent like young grass tickled his nose. The smell of her hair.

Roselyne abruptly turned and gazed at his face.

"Look at that, you're even redder. Hey, why is that?"

She innocently asked as she ran. Cleo was hard-pressed to answer, half in desperation, he screamed out his reply.

"I-I don't know. It just goes red on its own!"

"So it goes red on its own. Hmm."

Without the slightest drop in speed, they passed through the gaps between the trees, evading the underbrush that impeded their way. With the shrubs and lot thickets, it took but a leap. Roselyne pressed right into the places where it looked like they were on the verge of collusion, and each time, Cleo felt the hairs on his body stand on end.

While he didn't notice it as he frantically clung to the girl's back, Roselyne was fluttering the hem of her raincoat as she gave a fun laugh. And to the time the day ended, her mad dash didn't stop. Eventually, they ran into a large cliff, and with no choice but to take a detour, they went out onto the riverbed that fell alongside the cliff. That was where they would spend the night.

3

That night's moon hid behind the clouds. While at times curious of the ground, it would peek out its face, the thick clouds served at the curtain of knights to envelop the forest. Without focusing one's eyes, it would be impossible to even tell the expression of the one right beside you.

Like a fishing line, Roselyne hung a number of her vines in the river, and within a few minutes had caught her first fish. Without any bait, how did she manage to catch it in the darkness? Cleo tilted his head in admiration.

During his musings came the second. Then the third. Then the fourth.

She bit down on the fish she caught head-first, paying no heed to bones or scales as she crunched them to bits. More a display of their death throes than their liveliness, the fish flopped their tails left and right as they disappeared into the girl's mouth, and seeing that silhouette, Cleo felt just a slight chill. When he was eaten himself, was that how he'd go down? He strongly shook his head to swiftly forget the scene he just witnessed, as he bit into a red thin-skinned fruit from a nearby tree.

"You don't want any fish? You really like your fruit. Are all humans like that?"

Roselyne said, plucking out the scales stuck to her gums.

To be honest, he was mildly disconcerted by a life of only fruit from dawn to dusk. He took a glance at the energetic fish she had brought to shore, his eyes cursed, 'I'm sure it'd be tasty if I grilled it'.

"No, I don't like them to such an extent, it's just, eating meat and fish raw is a bit..."

He had eaten raw fish in carpaccio and such, but while that was raw, it was properly prepared. The wild way of eating she displayed was beyond him. If there was something else to eat, then he'd prefer restraining from taking a bite while the fish were still dancing.

"Raw is no good?" Roselyne seemed a bit puzzled. "Then how are you supposed to eat them?"

"Umm... I'd be able to eat it scorched."

“Scorch? By scorch, you mean fire? Then Cleo, you can shoot fire from your hands too?”

Roselyne grimaced, drawing her body back warily.

“Umm... are you talking about fire magic? No, I can’t use any magic. There’s this tool called a match you can use to light a fire, though I don’t have any on me right now.”

As Cleo said that, Roselyne reverted her body with a look of relief.

“In the past, there was a human who could make fire from his hands. I hate fire. It’s really hot and painful. If you use that on a fish, can you really eat it? Won’t it be bitter?”

She seemed to be imagining it burnt to black ash. ‘No, not like that,’ Cleo waved his hand.

“Even if I say scorched, I don’t mean that much. Just so it doesn’t burn—through it’s tasty if it’s just a little burnt—if you cook it well, it’s warm and juicy, and quite delicious. If I had some matches, I’d definitely like for you to have a taste.”

“...Hmmm.”

Roselyne offered a curt response.

“Hey, more importantly, how much longer to the blue rose?”

“...Yeah, give me a second.”

With the subject changed so easily, Cleo gave a wry smile as he took out the magic compass.

“I can’t give you a precise distance, but I can give you an estimate to about how close we’ve come. It might be a bit difficult in this darkness, though.”

If was knowledge he had learned from an adventure novel once read. Cleo played the part of the novel’s protagonist, holding the compass level to the ground, giving it a half turn as if winding a screw. He stared at it intently. It was hopeless. He groaned.

“It’s too dark to see the needle. If...”

The moon comes out of the clouds, he was about to say. As if his wish had reached the

heavens, so precisely did it come to be. A moment of moonlight illuminated the two. Cleo quickly pivoted the compass again.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

Cleo spun the compass one last time, silently observing the movement of the needle. Roselyne swallowed her breath and imitated him.

“..... Alright.”

“Eh... you could tell from that?”

Yes, Cleo nodded.

The principle was simple enough. The axis supporting the needle of a charmed compass was purposely given a rough finish by the craftsman, leaving a moderate coarseness to the touch. The coarse texture strengthened the force of friction, putting a break on the needle's rotation. Thanks to that property, if you turned the needle in the exact opposite direction, it would take a bit of time for it to return to the correct orientation. This time could be used to calculate the distance to the guide stone. It was said that a reliable compass in the hands of an experienced adventurer could give you the distance in meters.

At Roselyne's place, the 'Cliff with Pretty Sunrise', it took a little over two seconds to adjust. This time, in both tests, it was approximately one. According to the novel, when the stone and charmed compass are in extreme close quarters, the needle will adjust in the time it takes to say, “Ah,” which means—

“I'd say we've likely walked over half the distance.”

“Really? Then we'll get there tomorrow?”

“Yes... t-that's about right.”

There was a high probability. But he didn't have the confidence to declare it; the reason being, he was an amateur who had just brushed up on the knowledge, and no veteran adventurer.

"Either tomorrow or the day after, we'll probably..."

"Reach?"

"Reach... maybe."

"...?"

"...We might not."

An ambiguous statement from such fear of a definitive.

A while later, Roselyne spoke with a tilted head.

".....What's that supposed to mean?"

The moon was covered in clouds again, he couldn't tell what face she was making. But her voice alone was adequate to express her discontentment.

"In that case, you haven't the slightest idea. What were you doing back there?"

".....I'm sorry..."

Cleo's face grew hot.

From Roselyne's point of view, perhaps without any spite, she intended it as a simple question. But Cleo didn't think so. He got the feeling she was drawing near to condemn him. Shameful, embarrassing, he wanted to dissipate like the air this instant.

"Why are you apologizing?"

He heard Roselyne's sigh in the dark. That was the second sigh today.

"Whatever. Then let's go to sleep already. For tomorrow's sake."

In a fine, shaking voice, "...Yes," Cleo finally managed out a word. Perhaps erased by

the rush of the river, it failed to even reach the girl's ears. But Cleo burrowed into his sleeping bag without paying mind.

The fact the moon hid behind the clouds was a stroke of luck to Cleo. The fact the river's sound was surprisingly loud was convenient.

In the pitch-black darkness, Cleo wept just a little.

(But... I'm doing my best too...)

After that, Cleo couldn't quite find it in him to sleep. Around thirty minutes later, around when the traces of tears flowing down his temple had dried out, his self-loathing bubbling up like an overboiling pot had been contained.

(Normally, I'd have long since come down with a fever and collapsed... I wonder why. Is it because I came to this forest? Because I met Roselyne? I get the feeling my body's a bit sturdier than before.)

Perhaps the air was better. Perhaps liberated from the psychological stress that was the Grant House, his body's immune functions had increased. But Cleo had no way of knowing.

(Whatever the case, I'm doing my best. Even if no one recognizes it... that's right, I should know better than anyone that I'm doing my best.)

Even if it was in his head, Cleo showed an unusually firm will as he aggressively justified himself. But that also grew futile in no time. Nothing more than the loser's howls, so he felt.

(I know. It's hopeless at this rate, no matter how hard I'm trying... I have to raise her affection more, I have to get Roselyne to like me more and more.)

Someday, Roselyne would grow tired of Cleo. The day would surely come. Or perhaps, some circumstance would make it so she couldn't keep Cleo any longer. When the time came,

'I don't need you anymore, but I'd feel bad about eating you,'

'I'll return you to the world you were born and raised in outside the forest.'

‘Farewell. You’ve got to live strong.’

He would need her to be, or else. That was the most ideal route Cleo could think of for survival. For that sake, he would need her to develop enough affection she would at least hesitate a second to kill him.

But what was he supposed to do to garner the magic beast girl’s affection?

A magic beast’s psychology was still largely an unexplored field.

Then should he make an appeal to her psychology as a young girl?

(Well about that... what sort of things do girls even like?)

Unfortunately, Cleo was mostly ignorant when it came to human girls as well. Forget dating, he had never even chatted with a female friend.

(For example, should I show her how cool and dependable I can be...?)

Cool? Me? Cleo cynically raised the corners of his lips.

No, but still, if he was looking for affection as a pet, more than that–

(Would it be better if I was unreliable in a way that made her want to protect me?)

No, no, Cleo shook his head.

(She sighed when I slipped around noon, did she not? That was definitely her fed up with me.)

Then what do I do? That’s no good, that’s not it. He felt as if he had stumbled into a labyrinth with no exit. And like many fifteen-year-old boys in the world, Cleo spent another night agonizing over the philosophical perplexity of, ‘How am I supposed to get a girl’s attention’ as he repeatedly cross-examined himself.

Right beside him, the Roselyne in question was sound asleep a smile occasionally mixing in with her sleeping face.

Zzz...

Some bird or beast let out its cry.

Cleo abruptly opened his eyes. It was already morning. He had no memory of when exactly he had fallen asleep. And Roselyne was peering into his face. She was intently examining his sleeping face.

“Morning, Cleo.”

“Good... good morning, Roselyne.”

They exchanged the usual greetings.

“I’ll go get you some fruit,” Roselyne parted from his side. Just at that moment, the intense morning rays poured onto his face, making him flicker his eyes.

He rose up and yawned, worming his way out of his sleeping back. Taking the empty husk, he squeezed the air out of it as he scrupulously rolled it up when it struck him.

(Roselyne back there... don’t tell me she was making shade for me...?)

He didn’t have the courage to ask her directly. He discreetly gazed at Roselyne as she reached out her vines to pick fruit. The girl’s back—she was surely humming that song—bobbed along to the rhythm. She looked to be in a good mood today. It didn’t seem there was any lingering discomfort from their exchange the previous night. He pat his chest in relief.

After a light breakfast of fruit, Cleo tipped his canteen into the river’s flow and took a gulp of the newly filled water. At the pleasant feeling of the cold water washing away the fruit juice stuck to his throat, another gulp, then another... he almost forgot himself. But drinking too much might ruin his stomach, so he exercised self-control.

“Hey, let me see it too,” Roselyne reached out her hand.

When he readily handed over the canteen, she sounded her throat as she drank the water down.

“Ah, that’s good stuff. You can plug it right down, that’s a real convenient thing you’ve got there.”

Ever since she imitated Cleo drinking from the canteen, she had become addicted to it.

On the other hand, the fact that his lips were indirectly touching hers by means of the canteen still flushed his ears.

(W... why am I getting flustered? I'm dealing with a magic beast. She eats people, for god's sake...)

He shook his head to sweep away the bittersweet emotions he was having a hard time reigning in himself.

He felt a gaze.

"Your face is red again. Why does it turn red? Is it because you drank cold water?"

Roselyne looked at him inquisitively. Their eyes met.

"No, t... that might just be it."

Ahahaha, he played it off with a laugh, falling to his knees on the riverside, washing his face as if trying to put on a cap of water. Roselyne cocked her head.

"Humans are kinda interesting."

She muttered and narrowed her eyes.

Ukukuh, she laughed.

Cleo didn't notice.

After spending more than enough time washing off the sweat he shed in his sleep, Cleo finally took a breath. The breeze glancing off the river caressed his sopping wet face, the red, hot portions pleasantly vaporizing and cooling down. Behind his eyelids, it tensed him up to the back of his eyeballs. In his clear vision, Cleo caught sight of a certain something.

".....aaAAh... AAAAAH!!"

“Whoah....w-what!? What happened?”

Cleo’s exclamation almost made Roselyne drop the canteen in her hands.

“Oooooover there! Right there!”

Cleo’s index finger strongly pointed out a single point. Roselyne’s eyes swiftly moved.

“.....Aah!”

Across the river, a little way’s away, a blue rose swayed in the river’s breeze.

Destroyer of the Forest

1

Elkada started out as a fort to protect the national border, but ever since diplomatic relations normalized with the neighboring country they were in a state of cold war with, the town achieved rapid development as a hub of trade.

The city gates there had only been two of naught ten years ago now numbered five. There were already plans to add more. Merchants, craftsmen, adventurers, even the mafia, various sorts would pass through the gates. This town halfway down the road of development swallowed down the dreams and desires of many a man to grow further.

The main road that continued on from the Grand Karr Mustanghus Gate- The oldest structure in town- was once again enveloped in the vigor of the morning market. As if escaping from that hustle and bustle, if you tread foot down one of the back alleys, you'll find a small sign that reads, 'The House of the Twin Firebreathing Dragons'.

Despite it being morning, the store's interior was dark, as if to threaten the town boys who wished to prove themselves, 'Do you have the courage to go in?'. In a corner of the dark store interior, before the bulletin board illuminated by a lamp, stood two men. The first, a man in an indigo-dyed mantle started fixedly at a single sheet of paper with a sharp glare.

[Search Request—Reward: 200,000 Gelt]

The board listed out various requests for those with time on their hands, but among them, it was a conspicuously large sum.

"You doin' it, that request?"

Making her way over with a series of thuds and the grating of floorboards, the large-built female proprietress of the establishment called over in a menacing, hoarse voice.

"If you're doin' it, you'd best prepare for a fool's errand. Lookin' for some missing brat

in that stupidly vast Clamberra forest? I'd say he's become beast food ages ago."

Still with his sharp glare, the mantled man slowly turned his face towards the mistress.

"If you're asking if we're gonna do it, the answer is hell no."

Ringling his nose a, 'Hmph', he purposely carried on in a loud voice.

"We're hunters we are. Not odd jobs. Got no interest in missing person searches."

That moment, the men in the store with their swords and axes focused on the mantled man at once. Odd jobs was a scornful, sarcastic term to refer to the adventurers who would do anything as long as there was money to be had.

The mantled man faltered not under the concentrated fire of eyes, returning the glare of the longsword user with the eyepatch sitting closest to him.

"What's that? You got somethin' to say?"

The eyepatched man made an awkward face as if to say, "Why just me?" and swiftly removed his gaze. In nervous voice, "M-madam... I'm leaving the money here," he said, leaving behind some change and a meal half-finished before fleeing. The others narrowed their shoulders like scolded children and hung their heads.

It seemed they all knew how dangerous this mantled man truly was.

"Keh. Cowards the lot of them."

"Hey, lay it off, Carnac. They're all here to spend a relaxing morning... sorry about that."

The other man beside the mantle, an archer with a large scar down his cheek, sent a sociable laugh to the troublesomely wincing clientele; He placed an order for a 'Whatever bean soup' from the proprietress.

"What about you?" He urged on the other.

"I only eat bacon and eggs in the morning," the mantled man unpleasantly answered.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Just thought I'd asked—then, that's all we need."

“...Your drinks?”

Said the proprietress, whose lack of sociability didn't lose to the mantled man's. The man with the scarred cheek took a glance at his partner's face. His brow furrowed, he looked the other way as if it was someone else's problem at this point.

With a wry smile on his face, the scarred man stuck up two fingers.

“Two waters.”

With a rough sound from her nose, the proprietress jerked her chin towards an empty seat, thud, thud, creak, creak, she left for the kitchen. The mantled man clicked his tongue, and with the scarred man soothing him, the two took their seats.

A half-eaten bowl remained at the table the eyepatched man had been sitting. Whatever bean soup. While it was called whatever goes, it was simply made by boiling whatever beans were the cheapest to buy of the season. It was listed out on the very bottom of the shop's menu, the cheapest dish they had. By the way, the second cheapest dish was bacon and eggs.

The scarred man leaked a single sigh, striking up conversation with his companion sitting across from him.

“Hey, Carnac. I, see, I think a missing person search isn't bad—once in a while.”

Holding out his palm to reign in his comrade who had leaned his body forward as a show of anger, he continued on.

“But that place is no good. I hear the ‘Destroyer of the Forest’ was sighted around Clambera forest. That poacher who went to capture the mirror-shelled tortoise ran into it, apparently.”

“Seriously?” The mantled man opened his eyes in surprise. “Even more reason not to go.”

As he hung all his weight into its backrest, the rough-made chair raised a shriek.

“...But you know, Carnac,” looking at the menu hung on the wall, the cheek-scarred man spoke. “You might be fine with bacon and eggs every day, but once in a while... I'd like to eat something higher up on the menu.”



Roselyne first used her vines to hoist Cleo up, carrying him over to the opposite shore. The river was around twenty meters across, and while its flow was gentle, the middle portion looked to boast a considerable depth. Entrusting his body to her vine, Cleo watched the masses of water flow under his feet, a light chill running down his spine. He couldn't swim.

After that, Roselyne suspended her own body in the air with seven or eight vines, traversing the river like a spider.

On his arrival, Cleo let out a sigh of admiration.

"...Beautiful..."

It seemed he had no other words. Cleo found he was only able to nod. A transparent, yet be that as it may, a vivid blue bathed in the morning light, glimmering like the finest gemstone. He could see why some called it the blooming sapphire.

Um from the riverbed, running along the river around ten meters away from it, blue roses that reached up to Cleo's chest bloomed in profusion.

When he swallowed a breath, the rich fragrance pierced through his nasal cavities. The back of his head went numb, he felt he might unintentionally doze off. Hurriedly shaking his head, he slapped sense into his cheeks.

(Why? This isn't anywhere near the stone the compass is reacting to.)

They had gone off route to circumvent the cliff. There was no way this was the goal. Producing the charmed compass from his chest pocket, he tried checking it. He walked the plot of blue rosses from end to end, but the needle still pointed forward. This really wasn't his original destination after all.

(Well, it's not like blue roses are restricted to growing in one place. Just means we happened to be in luck.)

The forest was so vast. It was no peculiarity to find a single variant of vegetation growing in multiple locations. Whoever buried the guide stone that formed a pair with Cleo's compass knew of one of those sites, and that wasn't here. That's all it meant.

(I kinda get the feeling I've been cheated, but... well, whatever works.)

With this picturesque view before his eyes, it all seemed so inconsequential.

Given some time, Roselyne's mouth started to motion. In her excitement, it was gradually accelerating.

"Amazing... I've never seen such beautiful flowers before... hey, it's amazing, right? Hey, can we make the roses at my place blue, hey?"

Hey, het, she said as she grabbed Cleo's shoulders and violently shook them.

"Whoa... Hol, hold it... that's... impossible."

The hands shaking him came to a sudden stop, Roselyne looked up at Cleo with upturned eyes.

"...It's no good? No matter what...?"

It was a lonely look like that of a puppy waiting for someone to take it home. Regardless of her status as a magic beast, it was the first time a girl made such a face to him, and Cleo's naïve boy's heart was tempestuously flustered.

"That's... ummm... nothing we can do about it. Whenever you want to see blue roses, just come here again--"

"I don't want that! I want to see them right when I want to see them!"

Roselyne's hung head emphatically rose in her cry. For a moment, Cleo had lost his words.

".....Hey, I get where you're"

"No, no, no. I want a blue rose. I want one at home. I want itttttt!"

A great many vines burst from the hem of her raincoat. When she stamped her feet, they matched her motions to rise up high, and slam into the ground like whips. The screams of torn air and thrashed earth mingled in as the targeted ground grew visibly caved in.

“Hey, I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it, I want it, do something about this!”

Roselyne started shaking Cleo again. She shook him more than a carriage on bad road. Just a little more, and his nosebleed would spout and he’d swoon.

At that time, something suddenly crossed his head.

The sort of flash like the single coin that falls when you turn over an empty wallet and shake it up and down.

(.....?)

A single revived scene in his memory. That smile he could clearly recall even now belonged to Joseph’s laugh. Nearby, a rose blooming in two colors, yellow and orange. That recalled vision ended in a single short instant, but he had definitely said this.

‘Using that method, you can get two colors of rose from a single stem.’

“...Ah... Ahh...!”

His hollow eyes gazing at the past, Cleo found himself crying out. A surprised Roselyne stopped her hands shaking him.

“Huh? What? What’s wrong?”

Cleo muttered as if talking to himself.

“...We might, be able to do it.”

“Do it... you can make the roses blue?”

Stars twinkling in her eyes, Roselyne started shaking Cleo’s shoulders again. Had he still been talking, he’d likely have bit his tongue. Making a ‘wait’ gesture with both hands, he patiently waited until the shaking died down.

“So which is it? Hey? You can do it, can’t you?”

“...Making a red rose blue is, as I said, impossible.”

Sensing the shaking might recommence, he signaled to wait again.

“But it might be possible to grow this blue rose from a red rose’s stem.”

“The stem... is what? What do you mean?”

“This portion. You stick the blue rose on this portion of the red rose.”

When he pointed out the stem, Roselyne’s cheeks flushed red.

“You can do that? Something like that is...”

Feeling pressure from the girl’s heated gaze, Cleo nodded.

“We might be able to graft it.”

3

Grafting- by joining two or more pieces of vegetation at a man-made bisection, a technique to affix them as a single individual. Cleo frantically grappled with his memory to explain it to Roselyne.

In the Grant House courtyard, there was a rose that bloomed in two colors. Joseph had grafted it while he was still alive. Cleo had quite liked that yellow and orange combination, having painted it numerous times. Beside him, “What sort of colors do you want next?” Joseph happily inquired. Even now he could remember that jovial grin, and the light that caught on his pure-white teeth.

At the time, he had received an explanation on grafting.

“Meaning, you cut this blue rose’s stem, and stick it onto the red roses at your place. But I can’t say it’ll succeed every time. More so, the probability of failure is higher”

The chance was only lowered by the fact Cleo only received a simplified explanation. What’s more, it was a tale of years ago. Perhaps there were some hazy parts of his memory. And the largest problem was that Cleo was an amateur at horticulture. The prospects of success were slim.

Yet despite that preface riddled with excuses, her expectations weren’t swayed in the slightest. She grew excited, her nose holes expanded as she raised a high-pitched

voice.

“But it might succeed, right? Then try it! Please do!”

Closing in, she gripped Cleo’s hand. Whether she knew what a handshake was or not remained uncertain. In her hands, she put a power strong enough to reveal the depths of her expectations.

In Cleo’s chest lay the embarrassment of having his hands held, but far exceeding that came the feeling of regret.

Excess expectations were only troublesome. That’s why he said the probability of failure was higher. That line had evidently failed to reach her, and in Roselyne’s eyes at that very moment, a subjective impression, ‘There’s surely no doubt it will work out!’ was vividly revealed.

If he betrayed that, if he failed, what would happen? Her high expectations would change to great disappointment, and perhaps eventually to a furious rage. No, it was amply possible.

(What that happens... I’m not getting off unscathed.)

His body quivered.

“Hey, then we just have to cut it? Leave the heavy lifting to me.”

Unable to wait any longer, Roselyne snatched a roses’s stem in her vines, about to pull it out. Cleo hurriedly cut in.

“Ah, wait a second. You have to choose one with a good bud eye... also, it’s better if the cross section is as clean as...”

Cross section?

“Ah...”

Just a little more, and Cleo would have cried out.

His head had been filled with thoughts of what would happen if he failed. Before that came into question, he noticed there was an even bigger problem he should have been

worrying about.

Grafting was only possible with sticking two clean gross sections together. Forcefully plucking them was out of the question. Meaning, a blade was necessary.

The only blade Cleo had was the adamantite sword, the sword Roseline said she “loathed”.

(Crap, w... what do I do...?)

He felt his blood recede. His complexion was the same as the splendidly blossoming blue rose petals before him. He timidly directed his eyes at the girl.

Roselyne looked back perplexed.

“What’s wrong? Today, your face is going blue. You can turn both red and blue, I see.”

Along with his vertigo, the sweat pooled up at his hairline flowed down his forehead. Cleo hurriedly wiped it with a finger so as not to be noticed.

“Oh... i-is that so? No... I wonder what, hahaha...”

“So you don’t know yourself? How peculiar. So what do we do? What should I do?”

The girl innocently inquired.

What to do? Should he keep the sword hidden, and claim it was impossible after all with no tool to cut it? But that wouldn’t be able to stave off Roselyne’s anger. Then don’t get my hopes up! She might say.

In that case, should he let Roselyne pluck it, and try sticking together two tattered cross sections? The grafting would undoubtedly fail, but at the very least, he’d be able to overcome this situation. And perhaps she could accept the fact they did what they could, and it just didn’t work out.

(When the time comes, no matter how disappointed she is, I’ll just have to act like I never saw it coming either...)

Am I capable of it? No, I have no other choice.

Swiftly shifting his eyes, he chose out a few limbs with buds, boldly informing the young girl awaiting an answer.

“Umm... then, that one, that one, that one... and that one, please pluck them. I’m counting on you.”

“This one and that one and... umm, this one?”

Roselyne’s eyes frantically chased after Cleo’s fingertip.

“This one... and also this one. Yeah, got it!”

With a vibrant reply, she reached out two vines, skillfully entwining around the space between thorn and thorn.

(This is for the best. This is...)

Cleo quietly gazed over her. But.

(Is this... is this really... what’s right?)

He had a lingering sentiment he couldn’t wipe out.

Roselyne had come here from her ‘place’ enchanted by the beautiful morning sun. Now, her heart had been stolen by the beautiful blue of the roses, and she prayed to see it every day. It seemed her nature preferred the pretty, the beautiful over everything. It was something a magic beast like her, and Cleo could reach mutual understanding on, one of their few points of commonality.

Was it alright to betray that?

What’s more, Cleo and Roselyne were together almost twenty-four hours a day. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before she spotted the adamantite sword hidden in his rucksack.

(In that case, yes, if that’s how it’s going to be...!)

Roselyne raised a cry, “Ready, set,”

At that moment, Cleo cried out.

“Wait... please wait!”

“Huh? W-what?”

She came to a complete stop, turning her face towards Cleo, who had suddenly raised his voice.

4

Cleo was no good with his father, but this was a little different from ‘hate’. To Cleo, his father was simply so terrifying, he couldn’t even direct enough hostility to label as hate.

Each time he caught sight of the wrinkle on his brow- one he had to wonder if it even disappeared when he slept- he felt as if he was being constricted by the heavy chains around his heart.

Even without the whip, simply feeling those displeased eyes on him around the clock was an unbearable torture. That’s why, before his father, Cleo constantly kept as meek as a slave. He lowered his head, waiting motionlessly for his father to finish his words, if not but a single second sooner. The only phrases necessary for a conversation between father and son were, “Yes, understood,” and “I’m sorry”—the two would suffice.

The current Cleo could feel that same pain from times passed.

Bound in chains, his heavy heart increased its pressure on his stomach and lungs. Painful whether he inhaled or exhaled. He felt he might return the fruit he had just eaten.

But now, he couldn’t overcome by becoming an obedient slave. Roselyne’s eyes were wide open, she waited for his word. Unless Cleo opened his mouth, this dull flow of time, like swimming through mud, would never move forward.

“...What is it? What’s wrong this time?”

As Cleo continued to hold his tongue, Roselyne’s eyes took on a dubious- somewhat displeased- hue. There was no time left for hesitation. In his parched, thirsting throat, he summoned up a cracked voice like the croak of a frog.

“You said before... that you hate swords, didn’t you?”

“.....Yes?”

From Roselyne’s point of view, the question was right out of left field. With a flabbergasted face, she lost her words for a while, until eventually, still confused, “...I did say that. I hate swords. What about it?”

She gazed at Cleo to probe out the meaning of the sudden question.

Enduring her gaze more piercing than a needle, Cleo slowly lowered his rucksack, and opened its mouth.

“I’m sorry, the truth is... I have one.”

To display his lack of ill intent, he presented her the adamantite sword, hilt first.

“Ah...!”

Roselyne cried out.

“That’s a s-sword, isn’t it...!! You had one? W-why? Wht did you never tell me? Could it be... you were hiding it? You were tricking me the whole time?”

As she said once before, the moment she saw the sword, her eyes displayed anger, slanting downwards all at once.

“So which is it?”

Her right left hit the ground. Along with an intense thud, came a tremor. It seemed the great earth was cowering from her rage as well. While the ground’s tremors were soon contained, Cleo’s trembles didn’t look like they were ever going to stop.

“...Th... that’s...”

“What? Say it clearly!”

Another thud. Cleo fell to a sit, his knees giving way.

“That’s, you know..... you said you hated even looking at them, so...”

“I did? Yes, I did. And so what? Are you saying it’s my fault?”

“N-no, that’s not what I meant...!”

“Then what is it? If you’re saying it’s not my fault, then it’s got to be your fault!”

“Eeh...?” Cleo was flustered by that forceful logic. “No... it’s not about whose fault it is...”

“You’re saying neither’s to blame? Then why do I have to feel so irritated? Who are you saying did this to me!?”

“Th... that..... I mean...”

While Cleo was hard-pressed to respond, an impatient Roselyne lost her temper and hammered out these words.

“...That’s enough, I don’t want to hear it! I don’t know you anymore!”

Changing her direction, Roselyne descended to the riverside. Extending the vines from her back, just as she did when she came, she made for the opposite shore. Cleo put some force into his clattering knees, Frantically leaping into the river to chase after her.

“W-wait, Roselyne...!”

“Don’t follow me!”

To brush off the pursuer, her vine whip grazed the tip of Cle’s nose. A hot impact raced through him. Cleo raised the scream of a small animal, staggering backward; his feet were caught up in the flow, causing him to fall with his backside in the shallows. The water came up all the way to the base of his chest.

“Ah...”

Roselyne muttered as she turned around.

Cleo’s nose bridge oozed with red blood. For an instant, Roselyne made the face of one assailed by a sense of guilt but, “I... I told you not to follow, didn’t I!”

And without turning again, she crossed the river and left. A soaked Cleo remained seated in the water—with nowhere else to go.

5

Having crossed the river, Roselyne proceeded down the path she trampled down to make in the opposite direction.

Silent as a gravestone, slow as an ox.

With a sudden stop, she stealthily crept her vines into the shade of the nearby shrubbery. She had sensed a presence. She grasped it without first learning what it was. In the clasp of the vine she pulled out, a fifteen-odd centimeter baron frog was bound. Roselyne drew it right before her face.

“Hey, I’m called Roselyne. What sort of name do you have?”

Flapping its feet in the air, the suspended baron frog croaked out.

“Ribbit? Your name is Ribbit?”

The baron frog croaked a second time.

“Then Ribbit it is. Hey, Ribbit, do you know about painti—”

Ribbit.

“...I was still in the middle of talking. Hey, Rib—”

Ribbit, Ribbit.

Roselyne furrowed her brow and glared, but the baron frog continued to cry out, ribbit, ribbit. Its front legs, its back legs scraped against the air, the fine shook idly to and fro.

“.....That’s enough. I don’t need you.”

Roselyne tossed the frog aside. The released baron frog croaked, ribbit, and with one bound disappeared into the thicket.

“.....”

Roselyne turned back to the path she'd been walking down, she quietly muttered.

“Hey... can I ask?”

A while later, a voice came in her head.

‘Are you talking to me?’

“...Is there anyone else?”

‘You’re right. It’s been about a week since you last talked to me. So what is it?’

Roselyne looked behind as she asked.

“Did you... notice that Cleo had a sword on him?”

Insteen replied.

‘Well let’s see. I did find it hard to imagine that a person entered this forest with no weapons at all.’

“Huh...! Y-you’re supposed to tell me that sort of thing! So even you’re hiding things from me?”

Roselyne raised her voice. After a short while, Insteen spoke up.

‘I did think he just might have something. It was just an intuition. If I said that and was wrong, you’d laugh at me again, wouldn’t you?’

“...What’s with that. You’re still mad about that?”

‘Not particularlyyyy. That’s not it at all.’ She said with a shameless tone, but soon returning to her emotionless voice, Insteen continued on. ‘It’s because even if he did have a sword, I judged that human presented no significant danger. If he was a danger to you, then no matter how you mocked or laughed at me, I’d have definitely warned you. By the way, may I ask something?’

“...What is it?”

‘Why didn’t you eat that human? You’re already sick of him, right? You should have just devoured him.’

“Eh? T-that’s...”

Roselyne’s mouth was awkwardly tied up. Why? Insteen urged her for an answer once more.

“That’s... I mean, Cleo doesn’t look like he’d be tasty at all. What does it matter? Any complaints?”

Roselyne bluffed as if she was trying to deceive someone.

Insteen’s voice came out, as inorganic as ever. ‘I have no complaints. We’re not in a season where food stock is scarce. But even so, I thought it was a waste. I’m sure he’s become foot to another beast by now.’

“Huh.....”

‘Look at the tree on the right. You can see how the surface is scraped down, right?’

When she took a look as instructed, a portion of bark on a single tree had been relentlessly shaved away. It was as if some sharp, pointed something had scratched against it again and again.

‘That’s a marking left behind by the beast that claims here as its turf. It’s up around twice your height, so it’s likely a considerably large one.’ Roselyne’s face froze up. ‘Perhaps it noticed us long ago, and was carefully watching from a distance the whole time. And the troublesome foe has left, leaving only a single weak human behind. What do you think would happen?’

“Yo... you’re just making things up!”

‘Yes, I am. But there is something certain. That human doesn’t have the ability to survive this forest on his own. Unless he reaches the outside while luck still allies with him, he’ll definitely lose his life.’

Roselyne’s lip had begun to tremble.

“He’ll lose his life... what do you mean?”

‘Did I never teach you before? It means he’ll die.’

A sudden gust blew through. The restful rustling of leaves raced through Roselyne’s head.

Death.

It was something Roselyne knew well. To die meant for the limbs to go limp, to leak excrement, for the eyes and mouth to stop moving. And gradually, like a rock, to go hard and cold.

It meant to become nothing more than a bundle of meat.

Roselyne turned around, taking off like a fired arrow. She hurriedly retraced the path she had come down. The wreckage of once-thickets strewn around the ground let off a crunch as they were trampled down again, the fallen and rotten trees surmounted in one leap.

Insteen asked indifferently, ‘Why are you returning? Didn’t you say you no longer cared about that human? Isn’t that why you left him?’

“Why? How should I know!?”

Gasping out a chaotic breath, Roselyne screamed.

“But I have to go back... I have to go back, someone in my head’s telling me! Insteen, isn’t it you?”

Rustle.

Crack.

Swish.

Roselyne came out before a large cliff. If she descended along it, the banks with the blue flower would be right before her.

‘It’s not me. I’m sure that’s your true heart, in which case, you must hurry. If you don’t make it in time, you’ll come to regret it.’

With her momentum, Roselyne was unable to make a sudden turn, her curve just barely making the edge. Even so, her speed didn't drop in the slightest. The pounding of the ground crumbled the edge of the cliff, the rubble swallowed into the depths of the ravine.

"Regret... hey... what does that mean?"

Roselyne weaved the question into the gap between rough breath. Insteen answered. 'It means to be tormented by memory. A large regret is able to keep tormenting you to the day you die.'

"I don't want that!"

With a howl, Roselyne borrowed the speed of her descent, accelerating to the very limit.

6

Cleo crouched by the riverside. It was as if he had seen a bad dream. There was no sense of reality to the world before his eyes. His entire body felt sluggish, as if he had a fever, and he could no longer stand.

He hung his head, burying it in the knees he held tight.

At present, Cleo was one step before tears. That demonic look on Roselyne's face-while it wasn't on the level of his father's0 truly was terrifying, and the trousers clinging onto his sopping wet thighs woke up memories of how he wet himself when he was young, flaring up his displeasure.

But that wasn't why. It wasn't like such a thing would make him want to cry.

He had no choice but to use the sword if he wanted to graft. And Roselyne would undoubtedly want to watch the work. If he wanted to grant Roselyne's wish, it was inevitable that the sword's existence came to light.

Even so, Cleo couldn't grant her wish.

For that sake, he had wrung out his courage, "I have a sword," he offered her his sincerity. But the result was this.

In the end, the world is made to make a fool of the honest. This was what saddened him.

For a while he unsteadily teetered along the edge of the hill called despair; but, before long, the rivers flow became a nuisance to his ears, causing him to raise his face.

(What do I do now...)

Even at a time like this, it seemed he didn't want to die. Now that he had lost Roselyne's patronage, death was right before him. If he wanted to be saved, he would need to start moving as soon as possible.

(Do I walk along the river...?)

There was no guarantee the river would lead out of the forest. But as long as he followed it, he wouldn't have to worry about losing his way, or going around in circles. What's more, he would at least have a constant supply of drinkable water. It wasn't a bad deal, he thought.

(Yeah... alright, let's go with that.)

Informing his feet of his resolve, he forcefully stood. As he retrieved the adamantite sword littered on the ground, the thought struck him.

(That's right, I'm here anyway, I should take back a few blue roses with me.)

He had been abandoned by his father, but he had at least reached the place the blue roses bloomed. He had managed to accomplish half of the 'Blue Rose Trial'. He wanted the proof.

It went without saying, he had no intent to succeed the house. If he managed to get out of the forest alive, he would offer the roses to Joseph's grave. As long as he had some motivating factor, it would greatly increase his chances of returning alive. That was the feeling he got.

Choosing out three good-looking limbs, he harvested them with the adamantite sword. Once he inserted them into his canteen, the work was done.

(Then let's depart.)

Stringing the rucksack over his back, he started off downstream.

Crackle, roll. His feet treading over the riverbed stones came to a stop a few steps down the line.

Cleo turned and sent a fixed glance to the opposite thicket Roselyne had disappeared down.

In his heart, sixty... fifty nine... fifty eight... he counted down. As if to interrupt his count, badum, badum, his heart pounded out.

Eventually, four... three... two... one.....

Perhaps she'll come back... one minute of such faint hopes.

Cleo's eyes lonesomely clouded over. His lightly shook his head and spoke.

"Farewell... Roselyne."

Turning on his heel, he directed his feet downstream again.

And then a mere few steps later. A sound as if a cannon shell had made impact with the water's surface raised behind him, as drops of water were sprinkled onto the collar of his shirt. Cleo vigorously turned.

I knew it! She did come—

The scene projected on his eyes differed from the one his heart longed for.

A large beast stood in the middle of the stream.

A bear.

No ordinary bear. It was large. Perhaps it stood higher than three meters. More than anything, it boasted four fore-limbs. The six-legged fire bear, also known as the 'Destroyer of the Forest'.

One of the most dangerous varieties of magical beasts that even a highly-skilled swordsman would run away from.

That magic beast was slowly, certainly, making its way towards him. In the space Cleo's was frozen in shock, the large build had hoisted itself out of the water, finally lifting its heavy-looking soaked feet up to trample the shore.

A tumble. A crackle. The gravel rung out.

Cleo slowly stepped back, so as not to instigate his foe. As things stood the distance between them was fifteen, perhaps sixteen meters. The six legged fire bear stared fixatedly at him, slowly... slowly... it approached on its two hind legs. To and fro, its upper body swayed ominously.

Cleo took another, larger step back, but in accordance with it, the fire bear's pace quickened as well. Only ten meters to go. Cleo's rationality had finally exceeded its limit.

".....!"

Turning his back straight towards the terrifying magic beast, he sprinted off. Right after, the sound of the six-legged fire bear's steps changed.

Boomthudthud, boomthudthud, boomthudthud!

Cleo instinctually understood. It was using all six of its legs to run. The footsteps had grown larger in the blink of an eye, through the sounds, and the shaking of the ground, he perceived that his foe had reached right behind him.

In the next instant, Cleo raised a scream. It wasn't as if raising one would result in anything, but such rational judgments were far beyond him. Regardless of what was going through his head, his mouth went and scream out on its own.

"WwaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

A thunderous roar rended the river surface.

Smack dap in the center of the flow, a pillar of water had risen, the tempestuous spray of water scattering in all directions with fearsome momentum. As if they had leapt right into the eye of a storm. Cleo involuntarily closed his eyes.

Something wrapped around his body.

A floating sensation came, as if he had been thrown through the air, as if he was falling head-first over a cliff.

It all happened in an instant.

...Thump.

By the time he noticed it, Cleo touched down on the ground. The bear monster—the six-legged fire bear- had, in some time unbeknownst to him, moved to the opposite shore. No, that was wrong. He understood he was the one who had crossed the river.

The thing coiling around his body writhed and came loose. Roselyne's vine. She stood above the river's flow, where the pillar of water had risen a moment before. The drops fell ceaselessly from her moist verdant hair. From her raincoat as well. Vines grew from its hem to suspend her body in the air.

Roselyne stole a glance his way, before immediately, awkwardly averting her eyes.

"...Are you alright? Any injuries?"

She said. Cleo's chest heated up. His welling joy became a voice that leapt from his mouth.

"...Y... yes! I'm fine!"

Roselyne turned to Cleo's face one more time.

"I see, that's good."

She gave just a little smile of relief.

7

Meaning it happened like this. Running headlong down the cliff, Roselyne witnessed the moment of desperation unfolding on the river bank below her.

A fleeing Cleo, a chasing beast.

If she continued her descent and crossed the river, she would never make it in time. And if she didn't make it, Insteen told her she would be tormented to death. Her resolve was made.

'You're jumping?'

"I'm jumping!"

The cliff was around twenty meters high.

One... hup! And Roselyne was sprawling flying through the air.

"Umm... thank you..."

As Roselyne rose to the bank, Cleo sent a timid voice to probe out her reaction. When their two gazes touched, it was Roselyne who moved first to awkwardly avert her eyes.

"N... not really, it's not what you think!"

".....It's not?"

There was no doubt it was Roselyne who saved him. And yet, which part of it wasn't what he was imagining? Cleo's eyes widened in confusion, but he had not the time to obtain an answer

"That doesn't matter, just get back. It's coming!"

She warned him in a pointed voice. By his blank glance, the bear had gotten down on all sixes, slowly backing up. He immediately realized it wasn't to run. It was securing distance to make the jump

And the six-legged fire bear took off in a mad charge. With six appendages accelerating its body forward, it soon reached its maximum velocity, taking a leap through the air like a massive shell. Drawing a parabola close to level, it made a flashy water landing right next to their shore. Almost like a declaration of war, an intense spray of water assailed the two.

Cleo frantically hid behind Roselyne. Even with drops of water shooting into her eyes,

Roselyne didn't blink once. With a level-headed look unimaginable from her usual self, she motionlessly observed her enemy. Extending around ten extra vines from her hem, she began to sway like a snake the moment before it leapt at its prey.

The six-legged fire bear rose to land, it didn't seem it was going to attack immediately.

It was wary of Roselyne after all.

"It's got six legs, but that's a bear, right? If it's a bear, I've beaten them before." Roselyne said, "...But they're quite a hassle to fight head-on. See, a bear's got strength, and they're a tenacious lot. If it doesn't attack, how about we just leave. Okay, Cleo?"

"No complaints there..."

Observing their enemy's behavior, the two of them indicated their intent to back down.

The six-legged fire bear's angered roar reverberated. As if to show off its build over three meters high, it stood on its hind legs, raising tremors in the earth as it approached. When it came to Cleo, from the moment he heard the bear's bellow, as if he had been dazed, he could no longer move a single step. His face winced in fear.

But Roselyne laughed.

Ukukukukuh.

Like a seed's first sprout, her vine showed their faces at the fire bear's feet. Concealing it behind her bottom structure, she had wormed it underground, dug it forward, and waited for the fire bear to come. The vine forcefully entwined around its right leg. As the bear's balance crumbled, she caught its left leg as well. With both of its legs sealed off, it staggered like an infant who still had a long way to go before walking, toppling forward face-first. The ground shook.

Roselyne didn't give it the time to rise, countless vines raced one another for first picking, tying up each of the six-legged fire bear's legs. In no time, it was left in a state where all it could move was its head.

"Good. It worked the same as last time."

Seeing the fire bear desperately writhe with every leg bound, Roselyne narrowed her

eyes in satisfaction. From behind her, Cleo warily peeked out.

“Roselyne, you already laid traps? I never noticed.”

“Pretty much. I didn’t think it was going to quietly turn back, so I tried out the method I used to defeat a bear last time. Four legs or six legs, a bear’s a bear.”

Roselyne pulled her vines in. With its hands tied- literally- the six-legged fire bear that could no longer raise arm or leg was dragged in like a fish caught in a net.

“All that’s left is to finish it off. How does your meat taste? I can’t wait.”

Roselyne licked the area around her mouth with her dark-red tongue. She raised her right-hand high. From the mouth of her slightly-raised raincoat, a large number of vines gushed out. Their numbers were roughly around thirty. Those vines wove together like muscle fibers, in no time at all forming a large whip easily five centimeters in diameter. Even one vine was able to lift Cleo’s body with ease. By winding them together, she lost some precision in their movement, but the destructive power she obtained in exchange was immeasurable.

Of its six bound limbs, the six-legged fire bear desperately mustered every ounce of power in its body, writhing, rampaging to free one, at the very least. Such resistance was futile, it was dragged at the girl’s mercy.

The beast was currently in a crisis; It had no choice but to make the call. What is a crisis? A crisis means death.

The six-legged fire bear’s instincts cried out.

—You must escape from death!

—You must make a sacrifice of it all but you!

And the magic beast opened its large jaw wide.

Elkada village once more. The House of the Twin Firebreathing Dragons

After a meager breakfast, sipping bit by bit at the water remaining in the cup,

...Hah. The archer with the scar on his cheek leaked a dreary sigh.

Across the table was his indigo-mantled compadre. His cup had gone empty long ago. Placing his feet up beside it, He swayed the chair he leaned back in diagonally as he spoke.

“Hey, pass one over.”

He wanted an after-meal smoke, it seemed. The scarred man irritantly placed his cup down and said,

“When your tobacco runs low, you buy and ready some. Otherwise, you get boxes in bulk and keep a stock—wait, how many times are you going to make me say it? You’ve got to stop counting on me.”

But like water off a duck’s back, his partner calmly rocked his chair.

“Got it, got it, I’ll buy some later, just give me some now,”

he presented out an arrogant palm.

Hahh.

After a long sigh, the scarred man scratched his head up and offered a word.

“—Out.”

“...Huh?”

“I’m out. Smoked the last one after dinner, day before last.”

“The last one...” The mantled man lifted his feet off the table, with just a bit of a surprised face, he looked at the man across from him.

“You’re that broke?”

The man with the scarred cheek gulped down the meager remnants of water in his cup with one swig.

“—Out. You’re not much better. Perhaps you thought you’d sponge on me if times really ran thin, but let me be clear. It’s not happening.”

“.....” The mantled man lost his words, his body leaned forward, he stiffened like a statue. Eventually, he clicked his tongue, settling sullenly into his seat. The ragged chair let out a grating, ear retching din.

A detestable silence carried on.

“Hey...” A while later, the one to open his mouth first was the mantled man.

“What is it.”

“Why don’t we hunt the destroyer of the forest?”

“Wha...!” The scarred man said, his eyes opened wide his shock. After opening and closing his mouth, his words finally came out. “Hey, hey, hey. Hunt it? It’s the forest destroyer we’re talking about here. You get what you’re saying?”

“Yeah. I hear you can sell its pelt for an absurd amount. Its claws, it’s fangs too—didn’t you know? That thing’s balls are the base of a medicine for longevity. Those rich folks with one foot in the grave; the colors of their eyes will change when they learn what we’ve got. And then, it’ll be ‘goodbye poverty,’ and ‘goodbye seedy bars’. Not a bad story, right?”

“Hey!”

Banging against the table, the scarred man raised a rough voice. The customers at the others tables winced their bodies smaller.

“That’s not it, that’s not what I’m talking about!”

“Then what is it? It’s rare for you to pick and choose with your work, Doggrun.”

Drawing near on the talks of money, the proprietress used cleaning up plates as an

excuse to intrude on the conversation.

“If it’s a get-rich-quick deal, then why not go for it? If all’s well, then I won’t have to look at this cheapskate who only eats bacon and eggs anymore, we’re all winners. Or don’t tell me—” She lowered her voice, “Is it poaching?”

Blatantly displeased that a hindrance had entered the conversation, the mantled man placed his feet back on the table with a bang, vomiting out words in lieu of spit.

“We ain’t poachers. Even the law won’t touch the destroyer of the forest.”

“Hah,” the proprietress rung her nose. “Then what’s there to lose? No problem at all. That destroyer of the forest’s got quite the dangerous name, but is it really that formidable?”

“No, you’ve got it wrong,” the scarred-cheek man shook his head a few times.

“Formidable or not, that’s not the problem. No matter how confident you are in your skills, if you run into the destroyer of the forest, you flee for the hills, no second thoughts. That’s the unspoken rule. ‘Don’t bloody touch it’ they say!”

Bang, he hit against the table again. His final line was practically a shout.

The proprietress opened her eyes and shut her mouth. Seeing that, the scarred man returned to his senses, awkwardly lowering the ton of his voice.

“No... I-I mean to say... the reason being that the destroyer of the forest... more precisely, the six-legged fire bear, by the way... whenever it feels it’s in a pinch, well, it breathes fire.”

A deep crease dug into the proprietress’ brow.

“Fire... wait, that’s it? To you lot, magic beasts that breathe fire should be a dime a dozen, right?”

“—it converts the entire area into a sea of fire.”

In places of his partner crudely scratching his head, the mantled man answered.

“Now listen well, even dragons, you know, when they breathe fire, they do it with a bit

of tact. The hell's it going to do if it burns down its own nest? Of course, the same goes for a fire magic user like myself. The six-legged fire bear is different. Without giving a damn to where it is, it breathes fire again and again, I'd even say it purposely makes a sea of flames so it can slip in with the fire and make its escape. And just like that, it wanders from forest to forest. That's why the bloody thing has no natural enemies. If anyone touches it, the forest goes up in smokes. I'm sure it, and the other creatures know this by instinct, so it stands unchallenged. Quite a nasty beast, ain't it?"

The mantled man laughed a Kuku, slouching back into his seat. The chair let out a shriek.

"Hah, I guess there are people like that too," The proprietress shrugged after a few blinks of her eyelids. "But that's a real piece of work. What a scoundrel."

"...Right? That's why."

Having regained his cool, the man with a scarred cheek finally opened his mouth.

"Everyone's taught when they're still green. If you meet the destroyer of the forest, you don't fight it. Run away to the best of your abilities. Before that thing opens its mouth."

And the stage returns to Clambera forest.

She dragged the six-legged fire bear in, just a little closer, and Roselyne thought she would hit it with a blow with as much power as she could muster. She twisted her body, her large vine whip ready and waiting.

But a scream-like voice suddenly resounded in her head, almost forcing her to release the vines binding the bear. The voice cried at her to do precisely that.

'You can't! Undo your vines and run! Hurry!'

"Eeh? W-what are you talking about. I finally managed to catch..."

At that moment, the six-legged fire bear's mouth opened wide to an unnatural extent,

and Roselyne noticed as well.

“...it and...”

In the back of the bear’s throat, like a lamp burning in the depths of a cave, a dim and hazy light of—

‘Dooooooggeee!!’

Immediately following Insteen’s cry, a red, blazing breath of heat emitted from the magic beast’s mouth.

9

A very short time indeed. One second, maybe two was all that time permitted. In that space, unraveling the vines and escaping out of blast range was impossible.

Roselyne could tell the enemy was trying to fire something from its mouth. From Insteen’s cornered cries, she additionally understood how dangerous of an attack it would be.

But that was all. The mere moments of time she’d been given were a signal of the end.

A bright red flame gushed out from the depths of the magic flame’s throat—

“UuuryaAAaaah!!”

And Roselyne cried out. What might be called her wild intuition stirred her.

She put all the power she could into only the vine binding the six-legged fire bear’s right hind leg. Giving the face-down bear’s body a one hundred and eighty degree rotation, the flames flowing from its mouth following along, and sliding to the side. But for only an instant, the blaze grazed Roselyne’s feet. She grimaced her face in agony, crying out again in rage.

“Youuu!”

Her large lowered whip hit sharply into the six-legged fire bear’s right leg. The cries of magic beasts crossed. The bear writhed in agony. While it wasn’t fatal, at the very least, its bones had been cracked. On the other side, Roselyne wasn’t unscathed either.

“Hot, hot, hot, that hurts!”

She had suffered a burn around her shins. While Roselyne kicked her legs, enduring the pain, she unintentionally let the vines binding the fire bear slacken. Without letting the change slip by, the minute it managed to force itself free, it crawled in a sprint and leapt into the river.

Finally regaining her senses after a while, Roselyne grit her teeth to crush down the pain and humiliation. Her body was shaking.

“...Urrgh, now I’m pissed! I’m definitely killing it!”

Her face red in anger, she was about to chase her fleeing enemy into the river. But, ‘Wait! You can’t pursue that one any further!’

“!?”

She had never even dreamed she would be told to stop here. Stamping her feet into the riverside gravel for a sudden brake, Just as she reached a stop, she put up a fierce protest.

“Hey, what are you talking about! That was really hot, really painful! It still hurts! I’m sure it’s going to hurt for a while! I’m never forgiving that thing!”

Roselyne’s emotions exploded. In contrast, Insteen had already regained her usual cool, saying this in her usual tone.

‘I get how you feel, but I have no choice but to deem you lucky that you got off with such minor damage.’

“Eh...?”

‘I’m sorry. It’s my fault for not recognizing it as a ‘Six-Legged Fire Bear’ at once. The lifeforms of the forest should never under any circumstance pick a fight with that one. We’re no exception.’

“W... what’s with that. What do you mean?”

‘What I mean is, with bad luck, the forest is done for. It will all be burnt away to nothing. Albeit, rather than luck, it all depends on that thing’s mood.’

“...!”

Done for.

All burnt away to nothing.

Those turbulent words threw Roselyne’s heart rate out of order.

“You’re saying... that thing will burn it down? In that case, we definitely can’t let it get away! That’s right, I’ll get my vines around its feet, and drag it into the water. Then it’ll be fine no matter how much fire it breathes. We’ll drown it.”

‘Stop right there!’

As Roselyne swiftly spread her vines into the river, Insteen roared. Like a mother scolding her child who had done a truly bad thing, and extremely harsh voice. Roselyne’s shoulders jerked up, her vines stopped just before they might touch the water’s surface.

“I mean, I mean...”

And like the scolded child, Roselyne voiced her complaints in a teary voice.

‘Your idea isn’t bad. But are you confident you can take it out in the river? Unconditionally, I ask you? If you fail, it’s no longer a matter of luck. This forest will certainly be burned down. Are you fine with that?’

Roselyne’s face curved into a frown as she hung her head. She had no rebuttal.

‘At this point, if we convey we have no further will to attack, it shouldn’t go so far. That’s why you should step down. Retract your vines. Hurry!’

“.....Erk.”

While that was going on, the fire bear had crossed the river. Rising to shore with a beaten, but unabashed body, it turned towards them to observe the situation on this side. Its body was still swelling with tension, that fact was abundantly clear despite the river between them.

Roselyne—reluctantly—abided Insteen’s words, trailingy stepping back. She stowed

away her vines. The sound of trampled riverside gravel eventually changed to the sound of rubbing against earth and underbrush. Eventually, her back hit against a single large tree, and she could retreat no further.

The six-legged fire bear didn't even twitch as it closely observed her.

'Now let's go back already. Slowly, make sure you don't incite it, slowly, gently, go back down the path you came.'

"Eh... Hey, wait a second."

'What?'

"We haven't picked the blue roses yet. We're going to bring it back, and make it bloom at our place."

'You're still saying that?'

Insteen roared again. When she was yelled at in her head, it felt like a fist was smacked against her forehead. Roselyne instinctively ducked her head.

'You came back to save the human, didn't you? And you succeeded. Now give up on the rest of it. If you get too greedy wanting this and that, in the end, you'll be left with nothing! Now!'

That tone was practically an order. With her head still pulled in, Roselyne groaned in gasped breath.

".....Ur, urrgh..."

Much like a young human girl, Roselyne detested lectures and being told to do this, do that. So in the past, no matter how the voice resounded in her head, there were times she would ignore it and do what she wanted. Yet there was never a precedent where things went well.

See, that's why I told you—was the line that came to her head more often than anything else in the world. Roselyne had learned from those sorts of experiences.

But today alone, she couldn't find it in her to obey so easily.

“I mean...”

The blue roses on the opposite shore caught the gently breeze, waving as if to invite her. Perhaps due to her lingering regret, they looked far more beautiful than when she had seen them up close, glistening as they reflected back the light leaking through the trees. For something so pretty to not become hers, far too irritating, far too sad.

At that time, Cleo gently held something out.

“Umm, Roselyne, here...”

In his hand was the canteen—the canteen filled with three blue rose stems.

“Ah... AAaAh... Aaah!”

A hysteric voice leapt from her gaping wide mouth. The first half of ah was surprise, the last ah half showed her delight.

“I thought I’d like evidence we made it here, and picked them a moment ago.”

“.....!”

In her delight, Roselyne’s cheeks flushed red. Her green eyes no longer reflected anything more than the blue flower petals.

‘Now isn’t that nice. He can do some considerate things, now and again.’

A moment passed and finally, “...Yeah! Yeah!” Roselyne energetically nodded. “Thank you Cleo! Really, really, really—” no matter how many times she said really, she felt it wasn’t enough. “—Really, really, thank you! Ah, this might be the first time I’ve felt so happy in my life!!” her body shook at the delight bursting from the pith of her body.

She no longer knew what to do with herself. She felt like embracing Cleo as he awkwardly scratched his head with a you’re welcome. While she personally didn’t understand what meaning the action carried, she was driven by insatiable urge to do so regardless. She didn’t get it, whatever the case, she wanted to hold him tight. If Insteen didn’t say anything, she’d surely have done so. What’s more, with enough force to tackle him down. But,

“Now you’ve got nothing keeping you, right? In that case get going. Hurry up.”

It was a slightly panicked voice. If she lingered any longer, she would likely get shouted out again. Roselyne begrudgingly contained her internal impulses.

“Ah, fine, I got it. Then Cleo, let’s get going. We’ll quickly return to our place and, umm, what was it again... right, right, get grafting!”

“...”

For a moment, Cleo showed a conflicted expression, but that soon turned to a cheerful nod.

“Y-you’re right, yes! In that case, let’s make haste. The more time passes, the more the flowers will weaken.”

“Is that how it works? Then do you want me to shoulder you again? That way’s much faster.”

“Oh... n-no, that’s...”

Cleo’s back bent reservedly. And it was then.

It truly was akin to thunder.

The mad magic beast called the two to a stop with an eardrum-piercing, fearsome roar.

Cleo leapt in surprise. Roselyne painstakingly, slowly turned around.

“What is it, you’re being noisy. I don’t care what happens to you anymore.”

But still the six-legged fire bear roared. While he was more than twenty meters away, they could clearly feel the atmosphere tremble. Roselyne stuck a finger in each ear and groaned.

“Shut up, shut up! I can’t deal with you anymore. Let’s go, Cleo.”

“Y-you’re right...”

Roselyne briskly entered the path. Cleo continued on behind her, taking just one last look back. The six-legged bear that had stopped bellowing slowly stood on its hind legs, turning its back to walk off on two. The way it walked spoke of the considerable

damage it suffered to its right foot.

(...Good grief...)

He didn't know what it was making such a ruckus over, but it seemed it had finally decided to give up and leave. If he'd only disappear into the thicket, then it would all be over and done with. Cleo thought, but that was a mistake. The six-legged fire bear sucked in a large breath, and breathed out a crimson flame.

The field of blue roses flared up as the inferno enveloped them.

"Eh!? Aah... aaaaaaaaah!"

In the blaze, the blue flowers curled and squirmed as if writhing in agony, they wilted, turned to black gas, and disappeared.

"Cleo, what—"

A returned Roselyne also witnessed the tragedy on the other shore.

Nooooooooooooo!!

An excessively shrill exclamation ran through the forest.

"T-the blue roses. Wai, what does this mean!? That thing's burning it anyways!"

In chaos, Roselyne raised a bitter cry.

(What's... its deal?)

Of course, Cleo couldn't maintain his cool either. But driving his remaining rationality at full throttle, he thought. The fact he and Roseyne were quietly leaving without a fight was a fact so blatantly obvious presumably even a rhinoceros beetle could understand. So why did it breathe fire? Why did it burn? What did it want them to do? At that moment, Cleo noticed.

Rather, his eyes met with the bear's in the breather between flame and flame.

In short, it wasn't looking at Roselyne, but at Cleo. Why?

(.....Don't tell me...?)

The six-legged fire bear bellowed again. It gazed clearly at Cleo. At that moment, the terrifying answer that had flashed across his brain: He got the feeling it had just been proven true.

“That thing...”

Cleo mustered a shaking voice.

“It’s threatening you to leave me behind...”

10

‘He’s... probably right.’

“.....Huh?”

Roselyne spat out a voice of doubt and displeasure.

“Ah... no, well... I think that one probably thinks of me as his own prey, that’s the feeling I’m getting...”

‘To that thing, the boy’s already his game. He’s telling you to leave him.’

Cleo and Insteen, the two answered at once.

Roselyne froze. Leave Cleo behind? Or else, it would burn the roses, no perhaps the whole forest down. IF she wanted it to stop, she would need to hand over Cleo? But if she handed it Cleo, he would undoubtedly be eaten.

‘Roselyne.’

“.....”

‘Listen to me. I know very well that you’ve got quite a liking for the boy. But... ’

Roselyne didn’t respond. Without saying a word, she suddenly raced off towards the river.

‘Wait! What do you think you’re doing?’

There was no need to ask.

“I’m beating it to death! That’s the only way I know how!”

I can’t choose one or the other!

‘Wait! Stop! That thing breathes fire! If you enter the river, your movements were dull, you’ll become the perfect target! You’ll be burnt before you cross!’

Crackle.

Roselyne stopped her mad dash the moment before she leapt in. She got what Insteen was saying. She still retained that much rationality. She absolutely refused to accept it.

“If it breathes fire... then I’ll do that.”

‘...That?’

“Right, that.”

‘By that... you mean that!? You can’t, I told you before. That one’s way too risky.’

“...Risky?”

Roselyne shamelessly scoffed.

“What does risky mean again? I forgot.”

‘Roselyne!’

Ignoring Insteen’s cries that resounded through her head, Roselyne turned. She spoke to Cleo who had huddled up to hide from the magic beast’s eyes.

“Wait right there, Cleo. I’ll finish him off in no time. But just in case, you should get ready?”

“...Huh?”

Roselyne said with resolve. She stared straight at a hesitant Cleo and informed him.

“If I’m done in... I’m sorry, at that time, you’ll have to make it outside the forest alone.”

“.....!” Cleo’s face froze.

Once again, “I’m sorry,” Roselyne said.

11

The girl who apologized and smiled.

When she laughed, she looked like she would cry any moment, the sort that constricted the chest simply looking at it—that sort of smile.

“Roselyne...”

“Yeah?” the young girl’s voice was gentle. “What is it? Cleo?”

“Umm.....!”

Yet Cleo couldn’t say anything. ‘I’ll become his prey. Then everything will be settled.’ He didn’t have the courage. ‘Go get ‘em!’ when he was so powerless, he couldn’t say something so presumptuous. Unable to find the words to say, as he opened his closed his mouth as if gasping for air, Roselyne extended her vine without a sound, gently stroking Cleo’s cheek.

“...Rose...!”

Cleo tried to grasp her vine gently tickling him. But just when he was on the verge of touching it, the vine slipped away.

“Now I’ve got to go.”

And Roselyne changed her direction, glaring straight at the six-legged fire dragon.

“Stand back as far as you can, hide in the shadow of a tree. It’s dangerous, so you don’t show your face too much.”

Her back was like that of a soldier heading off to the site of their death. He had never

seen a soldier's back, but it was surely like this a powerful, melancholic back, he thought.

(Am I... fine with this...?)

Entrusting everything to Roselyne, doing nothing but watching. Was that really alright?

Seeing her smile a moment ago, Cleo thought. He held presentiment.

Roselyne might die.

To die meant she would never talk to him again.

She would never praise his paintings again.

She would never smile at him again.

She would

(No, that's wrong! I... why am I only thinking about myself!?)

She didn't have to talk to him!

She didn't have to praise him!

She just had to smile, and to live—that was enough!

He thought. Those were undoubtedly his true feelings.

But,

Still,

Even so,

He hadn't the courage to sacrifice himself and become food for the bear.

(Just... how hopeless am I!? I can't do anything, I don't do anything... a hopeless human being! Trash! Scum! Garbage...!)

At that time, the one who surfaced in his head was, surprisingly enough, the face of the butler, Marcus. In his expression that showed disdain for a loser, he said this.

‘So just like that, you’ll tell yourself you’re hopeless, it’s hopeless, and you’ll immediately give up. You sure have it easy.’

Then what do you want me to do!?

His anger flared, but it wasn’t as if Marcus was directly speaking to his heart. Borrowing Marcus’ image, in the end, it was his own voice.

He noticed.

When there might still something left he could do, the fact he simply wasn’t doing it.

(I haven’t been thinking at all. What am I able to do myself–)

That’s right.

Becoming a magic beast’s meal or not was an option the other side had arbitrarily pushed on to him. He hadn’t the slightest need to tag along with it. If he wanted to think of a means to hit this crisis, the first step was consider, “What am I capable of?”

(Something I can do... what can I do...?)

Something I can do.

Something Roselyne can’t.

Something I can do because I’m me.

Something Roselyne won’t.

Ah...

A flash came to his brain.

It was almost like it had been there from the very start, but he had simply failed to notice—it perpetually failed to enter his eyes until the moment he thought to look at it. Like a pebble at the roadside—that sort of flash.

“.....Roselyne!”

He didn't intend to shout, but in the excitement of unexpected inspiration, he ended up putting out a loud voice. At the very moment she would leap into the river, Roselyne opened her eyes wide and turned.

Cleo was only slightly indecisive.

(Will it really go as I want it?)

There was no guarantee. The same held true for if Roselyne went out alone.

(But, in that case... if it fails, I'm definitely...)

As if the numbness had faded, on the other bank, the six-legged fire bear gave another roar.

And making a show of breathing fire, it burned down even more of the roses. With that, around two-thirds of the blue roses were tragically converted to ash. The magic bear spewed fire still. Quite likely after it had gone through the blue roses, it would go on to light up the forest as a whole.

“I'm sorry, Cleo! I've got to go!”



絶対殺すわー！
アシタムネー！

Roselyne cried out. But Cleo had already made his resolve. He just had to do it. If he didn't, it would all be ash. The forest, and Roselyne, all of it.

This time, I really will get in that river, Roselyne thought when Cleo made a meaningful proclamation to her back.

"I... have an idea!"

12

Roselyne and Insteen shared all the information that came in through her eyes and ears. Lending an ear to Cleo's idea, Insteen thought.

(Fifty-fifty, perhaps? Yeah, I've nothing to say to that. But...)

(Even if it doesn't go as planned, we might be able to inflict that one with some sort of injury. While it might not be fatal, with luck on our side, it might seal off its flames.)

(No matter how it goes, the boy's the one at the forefront of danger. At least that part's convenient for me. My top priority's this kid's safety. Everything else is a permissible sacrifice, or perhaps inconsequential.)

(And hey, if the boy dies, this child will lose her reason to fight. She might give up surprisingly easily. She's a capricious girl after all.)

(When that happens, that thing can make off with the corpse, everyone wins.)

She thought.

She muttered in an internal voice so Roselyne couldn't hear.

"You can't do that! It's dangerous."

No sooner had Cleo finished his explanation did Roselyne's complexion change.

"I mean... can you really do that? If you fail, if it doesn't go well, you'll be burnt up, Cleo. Hey, Insteen, don't you think so too? It's risky, isn't it?"

Insteen appraised Cleo's idea surprisingly high.

'At the very least, it's far more decent than you blindly rushing at it without a thought in your head. I certainly won't say there's no risk, but perhaps there's some worth in trying it out.'

"Eh? B-but..."

Roselyne was perplexed by that inconceivable response. Insteen added on.

'Of course, I am against that notion of you fighting that thing in and of itself. But you're of the mind to fight no matter what happens, right? In order to protect the boy. In that case, I'd personally like you to at least pick the fighting method with the highest chances of success.'

"The fighting method with... a chance of success...?"

'Yes.'

"You think... there's a chance...? It really will go well...?"

"That I do. If his words are to be believed. Whether it goes well or not is something no one will know unless you try it out. So what about you? You can't trust him?"

The question was returned.

Roselyne honestly didn't know how good Cleo's idea was. She was terrible at using her head, and she didn't like doing what she was terrible at. But if the problem was whether she could trust him or not, the answer was simple.

"Of course I can! If Cleo says it... I'll believe! Yep!"

While that was going on, the roses continued to blaze. There was no time to hesitate.

"Let's do this, Cleo! Ready?"

Cleo gave a strong nod.

"Anytime!"

On the other hand, the six-legged fire bear had reached the end of his patience. The enemy didn't seem to have any intent to present that prey. That's why it would burn. The bad guy was the one who made him burn the forest. Thanks to them, it would have to search for a new forest, it would have to move again. How irritating. So irritated it was, it had no choice but to burn. The leg that had been attacked still hurt, so it had to burn the place down after all. How unforgivable. This anger was something every lifeform living in the forest need to know. To burn.

It took in a large breath. It was about to breathe a breath at the remaining blue roses, and the thicket of trees that lay behind them. At that moment, a shrill voice suddenly resounded behind it.

"Oyy! You... you blasted bear!"

Startled, it swallowed down the fire it was on the verge of releasing. When it turned, that prey was floating above the river. The tentacles of the enemy on the opposite shore wrapped around the prey and lifted it in the air.

It thought she had finally gotten up to presenting him to it, but that didn't seem to be the case.

The prey openly showed his hostility as he glared its way.

"You th... you think that makes you strong!? T-the likes of you? You just snap and make a mess of the place, so everyone knows you're too much of a pain to deal with! You're not, totally not scary at all!"

"I-if you've got something to say, come at me! Or are you only good for burning flowers that don't fight back!? You cower! C-coward!"

"What's wrong!? Get over here! You losin' your nerve, dammit!"

Hah, hah... hah...

Once that was over, he breathed roughly and painfully with his nose, his shoulders moving up and down. The six-legged fire bear was—not losing his nerve but was confused.

It really did want to leap out this moment, it really wanted to butcher him in one blow with its prided claws. That far-too-blatant provocative behavior made the magic beast's fighting instinct throb to a painful extent.

But something was wrong. Something didn't sit right in its stomach.

(Why is this one suddenly acting strong?)

This feeble animal that could only raise a scream and run when they first met? The beast's deep black eyes roughly got a taste of Cleo from top to bottom.

(Is it that in his hand?)

(Does holding it make this one strong?)

The six-legged fire bear had met those sorts a number of times. Was this boy one of them? But it got the feeling that wasn't the case. Its wild intuition was astir.

Its eyes suddenly caught something. There was something in the river. Something was disturbing the water's flow; while on the water's surface, chain-like lines intertwined and overlapped time and again, the six-legged fire bear's eye clearly captured what was below.

A tentacle.

It finally accepted it.

In short, this feeble creature was bait. If it leapt into the water without knowing anything, its legs would be caught up, and it would be dragged underwater. There was considerable depth in the middle of the river, so it would likely scrape at nothingness until it drowned. That was dangerous.

Then what to do? To the bear, that was an exceedingly easy problem.

The point was, it simply didn't have to enter the water. It took in a large breath.

The prey was well within firing range.

The six-legged fire bear opened its large mouth in a sneer, forcefully vomiting hellfire from the back of its throat.

Cleo was waiting for that.

The moment the bear opened its jaw, he swiftly took a stance with the adamantite sword in his hand. The moment he saw the red light in its throat, he cried out.

“Now, Roselyne!”

The flames emission from the bear’s mouth, and Cleo’s body taking off happened at practically the same time. Cleo was thrust into the flames head-on. There was no way the bear could tell what was happening.

The sword absorbed the scorching-hot flames from the point, letting off a dazzling light.

At a fearsome rate, the flames were sucked into the sword’s blade, Cleo’s body suffered not a single burn. In the next moment, the sword pierced deep into the magic beast’s throat. The point pierced out from its nape.

Unable to bear the impact, Cleo ended up parting his hands from the hilt.

(Did... did we do it?)

When he raised his face, his eyes met with the bear’s, less than thirty centimeters away.

“Wowoah!” He raised a scream and bent back. The six-legged fire bear showed no reaction. The sword had certainly pierced deep into its throat. In place of blood, it omitted bright-red blood as its huge bulk limply staggered.

“We did it...!”

Cleo was certain of his victory.



Still, the light hadn't died from the six-legged fire bear's pitch-black eyes. The magic beast slowly lifted up its forelegs, with its crooked black claws, a symbol of its brutality—a swipe.

The next instant, Cleo's body retreated at the speed of an eagle. It was Roselyne's doing. The bear's claws cut futilely through where Cleo had once been. The wind pressure lifted the bangs of his hair. Did the fire bear do it in regret of death? No, by the time it lowered its claws, perhaps it had already expired. Just like that, it lurched forward, its torso falling into the river. A roar, an impact, a spray of water.

"Cleo are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Roselyne's worried voice reached his back.

Without her immediate action, he would surely have been done in by those claws Cleo turned, and managed an answer with his shaking voice.

"I... I'm fine..."

And he returned a stiff, forced smile. Below his feet, the blood spewing from the six-legged fire bear's mouth seeped into the river, flowing away like a red ribbon.

13

"The roses burnt up..."

"So they did..."

The pitiful ash. Sadly, they could only be seen as some form of refuse. The two stood powerlessly on the spot. Only two, three plants made it out, while the remaining roses were all burned.

"Ah, god, this thing pisses me off!"

Snap. Whack.

The vine whip struck with anger. But the corpse showed no response. IT simply shook a bit from the impact. Cleo recalled how the sword had been left stuck in.

"Umm... Roselyne?"

“Yes? What.”

“I do apologize, but... could you turn its body over?”

Roselyne stared at him blankly.

“...I don't mind, why?”

“No, well... the s-sword, you see, it's still stuck in, so...”

“...Yeah.”

The moment Cleo voiced the word sword, Roselyne's expression clouded over.

She silently reached out her vines, wrapped them around one arm of the corpse, and flopped it over on the other side. The six-legged fire bear's face that had been submerged in the river now faced up, the hilt of the adamantite sword sprouting from its mouth now accessible. Cleo timidly approached the husk, gripped the hilt, and mustered his strength. With a deep breath, he grit his teeth, putting all his power into pulling it out.....

The sword wouldn't budge.

Perhaps rigor mortis had stiffened its muscles on death. Cleo removed his hands from the hilt, falling onto his bottom, his shoulders swaying with rough breath.

(What do I do if I can't take it out? I can't just leave it...)

After steadying his breath, he psyched himself up for another attempt.

The result was the same.

“Move over, Cleo.”

When he turned, Roselyne was right behind him.

“Oh?... G-go ahead.” When he did what was asked, Roselyne swiftly wrapped a vine around the sword's hilt.

“Hup.”

The adamantite sword that slipped out all too easily was presented to Cleo.

“There you go.”

“Ah... much thanks...”

Once Cleo had a hold of it, her vine came undone and retracted as if to say, ‘Ah, I can’t bear it anymore’. The blade was sticky with blood and fat. Before tucking it into its scabbard, he rinsed it in the river and wiped it off with a handkerchief. During that time, the two of them didn’t exchange a word. An awkward silence flowed through.

“.....”

“.....”

It happened when he had sheathed it, when he was putting it in the rucksack. Roselyne opened her mouth.

“I still hate swords.”

“Eh?”

Raising her face, Roselyne discontentedly gazed at Cleo. He hurriedly covered his face, “I’m... I’m sorry...” he apologized. Silence again. His heart raced as he waited for her next words.

She continued this.

“That’s why you’d beeettteer not point that sword at me.”

“...Huh...?”

“If you point it at me... I’ll be really angry, you got that?”

With those words, Roselyne sullenly turned away.

“Ah...”

Cleo finally noticed those were words of implicit recognition for his ownership of a sword.

“...O-of course! Thank you most kindly!”

Roselyne remained turned away, “For... for what? It’s not what you think...” she awkwardly murmured. Her skin so white it would be abnormal for a human, her cheeks turned just a little red.

“Now there’s no use dawdling around here, let’s get going.”

By the time they noticed it, the sky was glimmering at the highest point in the sky. It was soon to be noon.

“If we take it easy, the roses will wither. Let’s hurry back and g, gr... graft?”

“...You’re right.”

They were already ready to go. But perhaps in relief from being freed from the fear of the magic beast, for a while now, his stomach was strangely starved.

Cleo couldn’t bring himself to say it honestly, so he tried asking in a roundabout way.

“But, umm... you’re not going to eat that?”

He pointed at the six-legged fire bear’s corpse.

Roseyne took a glance at it, her brow furrowed, and she soon turned away. It was a reaction as if she was looking at garbage that had fallen by the wayside. And, “I don’t need it,” she spat out. “I kinda don’t want to eat that one. I’ll admit I am a little hungry right now, but no matter how empty my stomach is, I kinda detest the thought of eating it.” Plucking a red fruit from a nearby tree, “I’d prefer one of these right now. Cleo, you’d like one too, right?”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.”

Cleo bit into the fruit he received from her vine. After he crunched into its firm texture, a sweet and sour, rich flavor spread plentifully through his mouth, and Cleo naturally thought this.

It’s good to be alive.

Thus the two of them took only fruit in place of lunch baskets, crossed the river, and hopped on the road back.

A while later, waiting for the time Roselyne and Cleo's presences had completely disappeared, the smaller beasts materialized from the thicket one, then another. They heartily indulged in the corpse of the six-legged fire bear.

14

Upon returning to the 'Cliff with Pretty Sunrise,' the two lowered their luggage beside the grove of red roses, immediately getting to work. That being said, Roselyne simply fidgeted by Cleo's side.

The first necessary step was to recall the gardener Joseph's teachings as accurately as possible.

- ① Cut the stock (the tree to be grafted onto. In this case, the red rose) around two to three centimeters from the ground.
- ② Create a slit in the stock to insert the scion (the tree to be grafted, in this case the blue rose). Cut in vertically from the edge of the cross-section.
- ③ Prepare the end of the scion to easily insert into the slit of the stock. Cut diagonally around half to one centimeter up the stem, and lightly cut from the other side to taper to a point.
- ④ Stick them together. Insert the scion into the slit on the stock. Carefully and swiftly. For both the stock and scion, make sure the edges of both cross sections are in contact.
- ⑤ Bind with a string or something of that effect to fix it in place. Not too tight, not too loose.
- ⑥ Pile up enough dirt around it to conceal the stock.

Such was all the knowledge on grafting he finally managed to recall.

For each portion so distinct he could even remember Joseph's voice, was another portion where he was so anxious he couldn't help himself. But any more was impossible. The psychological stress of desperately digging up memories of the past was more than he could endure. It came with a throbbing pain as if his brain matter was swollen.

(Well, I've at least managed to recall the steps to some process.)

And next, he would need the tools. Be that as it may, he only needed one thing.

"Do you have anything long, something string-like?"

"String...?"

"To hold the blue rose in place, I need to tie it with something like a string."

Roselyne tilted her head, she held out one of her own vines towards Cleo.

"This won't do?"

"...Unfortunately not."

That vine was a bit too thick. Roselyne sullenly dropped her shoulders. There was no helping it, so the two of them fished around in the nearby thicket. There was a long blade of grass around fifty centimeters, and while he had some apprehensions about the strength, he decided to substitute it in.

(Now then...)

With that, all the preparations were in order. It was finally time to get to work. Cleo produced the Adamantite sword from his rucksack.

The time had come.

Taking a stance with the sword, a single stroke—was something he wasn't confident enough for, so pushing the stem of the red rose that would serve as the stock against the blade, he grated it against it like a saw.

Silence. Saw. Snap.

Silence. Crick. Swoosh.

Silence. Swish. Swish

Silence. Slip. Set.

Right as he inserted the scion into the rootstock, Roselyne stuck in her mouth.

“You’re sticking it in at the edge? Wouldn’t you be better off putting it somewhere in the middle?”

Without resting his working hands, Cleo wound the long, narrow grass around as he answered.

“No, this position is best.”

“...Is that so?” Roselyne’s face was dubious once more.

“Yes. The plants vital activity is most active right under the skin, and when that part of a plant is damaged, its cells will multiply to regenerate it. Grafting makes use of that property.”

“...Hmm.”

Roselyne gave an ambiguous reply. She likely didn’t understand.

“So anyways... how long will it take before it’s stuck on?”

“When it’s stuck on? Umm, well let’s see...”

For just a moment, Cleo’s hand stopped. Before long, they were back to moving mechanically.

“If I recall, if all goes well, in two to three weeks, the scion... the bit of the blue rose will begin to grow. By that point, it’s already stuck on.”

“T-totothree weeks...?”

“Yes, meaning... you know a day, right? One day seven times is a week, and twenty-one times gives you three weeks.”

“Twenty-one? Hmm, so there’s a long way to go. Ah, sorry, have I been getting in the way?”

“Eh? No, not at all.”

Once the first graft was done, Cleo flowingly got into the second one.

Silence. Silence. Silence.

Roselyne didn’t try talking to him again, in silence, she stared at the profile of the boy silently moving his hands. A gentle quiet enveloped the two. Like a river flowing without a sound, time leisurely flowed by.

15

Eventually, all the work was done; Cleo took a long, long—the sort that drained his body until he could stand no longer—sigh.

A deep breath followed. The comforting feeling of new air filling his lungs. It was almost as if his breath had completely stopped all while he was working.

“Are you done?” asked Roselyne.

Cleo answered, yeah, it’s over, lowering his hips to the ground.

Before his eyes, three grafted stalks sprouted out from the ground, almost like scouring rush. Immersed in the sense of accomplishment at a job overcome, Cleo’s cheeks involuntarily went lax.

(I did my best, but...)

There was no guarantee effort always led to results.

“...I can’t wait to see what happens.”

Was Roselyne already seeing a blue rose in vibrant full bloom? With her eyes trailing a bud that just barely showed its face, it was as if she was looking at something far in the distance as she softly muttered.

And, Ukukuh, she laughed.

“Umm... this might be redundant, but I’m telling you it might fail. That’s why, er, you shouldn’t get your hopes up too high.”

When Cleo timidly drove the nail in, a shadow spread over Roselyne’s smile.

“Eh... I’m not allowed to hope?”

“I also want a blue rose to bloom. That’s why I did the best that I could. But just because you work hard, that doesn’t mean it’ll always go well. When it’s hopeless, it’s hopeless...”

“...That might be true, but...”

Roselyne made a lonely face, Cleo’s chest pricked with pain.

“But I... when I saw your face before, I got the impression it was going to go well.”

“...”

Cleo’s cheeks bloomed red.

“You were looking at m-my face...?”

“Yes! I was watching!” As if giving a bow, Roselyne nodded strongly with her entire body. “When you were grafting, Cleo, you looked really reliable and cool. That’s why I staaared like this and thought. ‘Ah, this is going to work out’ you know.”

“He-hey, wai... hu, uh...?”

Reliable? Cool? Who are you even talking about?

His face so flushed it could raise steam, Cleo frantically denied those words of praise.

“Ple... please don’t put such hopes on the likes of my face! N-n-no matter what I do, I’m just a hopeless, useless, no good human being!”

As if to brush away a fly loitering around him, he wildly swung around both hands. Roselyne blinked her eyes incessantly at Cleo’s abnormal dismay.

“What’s wrong? Why are you saying such things?”

“I mean... I mean...”

“I mean, you painted a picture for me,” Roselyne spoke while counting on her fingers. “You taught me a song, and you gave me a good name. When I walked how you told me, we found the blue rose, and when I did what you said, we took down that bear. One, two, three, four, five! Look at that, you’re not hopeless at all.”

“T-that’s...”

“Hey, are all humans this amazing? Or could it be Cleo is just really amazing?”

Cleo was at a loss for words.

Me, amazing? He shook his head from side to side. He wanted to say she was wrong, but his words wouldn’t come out.

Round, and round, and round, and round.

Those ungraspable thoughts overflowed and swirled. In the whirlpool, a single fragment of memory leapt out. His father. The morning he was to head out on the ‘Blue Rose Trial’, his father seeing him off. His father’s face was like that of a soulless doll. As if he was indifferent. As if it had nothing to do with him. He didn’t think in the slightest the Cleo would be able to safely accomplish the challenge. Forget that,

“This one can die for all I care,”

His eyes told a story. At the very least, Cleo thought so.

(Ever since Laurence was born, father gave up on me. No, perhaps it was far before Laurence came...)

He couldn’t remember when, but there were times Cleo felt it in his child’s mind.

He was only being raised by lack of a better alternative.

The will of the master of the house propagated to all those who worked within it. Within that, the only one to send Cleo words of hope were the gardener Joseph and his mother.

“I’m sure the young master can become the best painter in the world.”

“Painting, studies, if you give it your best, I’m sure you’ll stand at the top of both. You can do it.”

The two who said that were no longer of the world.

Now surely he would live the rest of his life without any hopes ever placed on him.

Alone in his room.

He had lived thinking it all the way.

(Ah... crap... this is bad...)

The corners of his eyes heated up, as if they had caught flame.

“W-what’s wrong, Cleo?” Roselyne raised a surprised face.

Cleo—was crying. His overflowing tears fell drip by drip from the tip of his chin.

His tears flowed with no stop, with no signs of drying up, and finally, Cleo raised a sob like that of a young child. Not knowing what she should do, Roselyne could only wave her hands in a fluster.

“C-Cleo... hey, what hurts? Did you cut your hand back there?”

Cleo wept as he shook his head.

“That’s not it? Then why are you crying? Tears are what come out when something’s hurting right? Hey, Insteen, what’s wrong with Cleo?”

At her wit’s end, Roselyne asked for help, but it seemed she didn’t get the answer she was looking for.

“Who knows? Wait... i-if you don’t know, there’s no way I could ever know. Ah, god, what am I supposed to do?”

A confused Roselyne.

A weeping Cleo.

Before long, the area grew dark.

Cleo prayed from his heart for all to go well.

If the graft succeeded, then Roselyne would surely delight.

“That’s amazing, Cleo!” no doubt she would praise him again.

But it wasn’t just that he wanted to be praised, he wanted to be the sort of person worthy of her praise. He wanted to be the sort who could continue to answer her expectations for times to come. Of course, he was aware that was something incredibly difficult. Never in his life had God ever helped him out, so Cleo looked to the sky, and prayed to Joseph in heaven. Please, let the blue roses bloom.

In the night sky stained by tears, the first star sparkled bright.

When Fall Comes, Winter can't be far Behind

1

Four vertical strokes, then one horizontal slash to skewer them through. When the adamantite sword carved the marking into the tree trunk, it became the proof of five days' passage.

Cleo scratched in the fourteenth line. Two weeks had finally passed from the grafting. Gazing overly hopefully at the small stems poking their heads out of the ground,

"Is it almost there? Hey, is it almost there?"

Roselyne asked as if speaking to the rosebuds themselves. After swiftly stowing the sword in his bag,

"Well let's see. It—might be soon."

With an ambiguous answer,ahaha, he laughed. Ever since the grafting, her anticipation would grow day by day, bringing even greater mental pressure to Cleo. But today, there was something that bothered him more than that.

When he looked to the sky, he saw the dull patterns of clouds. On the verge of bursting to tears. An anxiety spread along Cleo's heart.

"...Looks like it's going to rain."

"Eh? Yeah, let's see."

In those past two weeks, it hadn't rained once. Taking the season, the climate of the region into consideration, one might call it a rare spur of good luck. But luck isn't something that carries on forever.

"Mn... hmm, is that so," Roselyne said, "It's probably going to rain within the day."

"Huh? Was that, umm... that person in your head?"

“Yeah. So you see, she says the wind carries just a bit of the scent of the ocean. On a day like this, it’s easy for rain to fall. If it rains, you think the blue roses open their buds in delight?”

At that infantile marchen-esque notion, the slackening of Cleo’s cheeks was inevitable. But now wasn’t a time to pass with such heartwarming feelings. If it really did rain, then...

Drip.

At first he suspected it must be some sort of mistake. A modest lone drop. At the sensation of something hitting against the back of his hand, huh? He thought, as the next instant was occupied with the sound of raindrops tapping against plants and soil.

“Wow, look Cleo, it really is falling!”

Not knowing the danger, Roselyne made merry, practically cheering it on. However,

(...This is terrible...!)

Cleo thought, hurriedly canopying his body over the grafted blue roses, guarding them from the raindrops. It was doubtful he could keep up that posture all the way until the rain stopped. He thought over what he would do.

“...What are you doing, Cleo?”

“As I recall... until they’re firmly joined, you have to keep the scion from getting wet. I can only hope this lets up soon.”

But the pouring rain only grew stronger. That good sun exposure of the site backfired on them today. Near the edge of the cliff, with no tree nearby, there was nothing to interrupt the water droplets streaming in diagonally.

(An umbrella... something to use as an umbrella...)

There was no such thing. The past two weeks as he accompanied Roselyne’s hunting,

he had searched out an item he could use as a substitute, but in the end, he couldn't spot anything usable.

(When there's only a little to go before the flowers might bloom... is this the end...?)

He firmly bit his lip.

There, the rain came to a sudden stop. It had yet to let up. Only around Cleo, the rain had disappeared. Widening his eyes and raising his face, Cleo looked up to see a clump of leaves forming a dome above him. Roselyne's vines had snapped and plucked the nearby thicket and undergrowth to make a leaf roof.

"How about that? Good idea, right?"

Roselyne swelled her nostrils in a triumphant smile.

Around thirty minutes passed, the rain continued coming down.

It was a cold rain. Cleo also broke off a leafy branch and tried using it as an umbrella, but no matter how he held it, his left or his right, one of his shoulders would be soaked. Not like this, not like that, as he changed his grip, eventually, the water came down the leaves and the limbs, wetting Cleo from his hand to his elbows. This was no consolation.

Furthermore, a rustling sound. A gust of wind shook the leaves, the pooled water scattered and poured down on Cleo's head. Nay, it was the opposite of consolation. Cleo tossed the branch aside.

(Still, it's cold...!)

The rain and wind were stealing away his body's heat, he understood it detestably well.

(What am I even doing here...)

To be blunt, there was nothing Cleo could do at the moment to protect the grafted roses. If anything, he could do little more than keep Roselyne company as she perpetually supported up the roof of leaves with her vines.

(Is that the only reason I have to stay out here...?)

But that being the case, it pained his heart to leave Roselyne there on her own while he alone returned to his sleeping tree to stave off the elements. No matter, if he continued to be drenched by the rain... Cleo's conflict and distress continued.

With another tremble of the forest, the wind blew again.

Contrary to his indecisive nature, his body reacted honestly.

"...Achoo! Aaachoo!"

"!?"

Roselyne's shoulders pricked up. The dome raised the sound of rubbing leaves as it shook.

"You surprised me. Could it be that was... a sneeze?"

"Ah, y-yes. I'm sorry."

"Oh, then, don't tell me, you're cold?"

"...Yes." He felt he had prolonged the revelation in a roundabout way. Cleo awkwardly gave a wry smile. "Today's rain is cold."

With a few blinks of the eye, Roselyne tilted her head. And once more, she tilted it in the opposite direction and muttered.

"It is?"

"Huh... you don't think so?"

"Yeah. Not really for me. Well, let's see, I don't think it's warm... around normal?"

"I-is that so..."

It did seem her sense for temperature was far tougher than a human's.

(Come to think of it, she was stark naked when I first saw her. If this made her cold,

she wouldn't be able to live here.)

But Cleo was a feeble civilized man. His damp shirt stuck to his back, he learned a chill that made him shiver. He perked his shoulders and shook. Looking over that perplexedly,

"Hey, if the rain is so cold then, this... umm, rain coat, was it? Should I return it to you? I'm perfectly fine if I get wet." Roselyne said. For a moment, he thought it a captivating proposal. Yet that would render her naked. Who in their right mind would go as far as to strip a girl of her clothing to take refuge from the rain? Before being a gentleman, it was too much a disgrace for a man.

"Thank you I appreciate the sentiment, but I can't reala- a- achoo! Achoo!"

When he tried to politely decline, the sneezes got in the way.

Stressing to understand, Roselyne furrowed her brow.

"You don't want the raincoat? Mnn, in that case, you should return to the tree at our place. I'll protect the blue roses."

"I'm sorry... I'll have to take you up on that."

"Yeah, don't worry. Leave it to me."

From Roselyne's point of view, everything to that point had been left to Cleo, and she hadn't contributed in the slightest towards making the blue roses bloom; she would happily volunteer for the role of an umbrella.

Cleo couldn't notice how she felt. Dragging along dark regret, he walked towards the large tree he used as a bed. Turning along the way, he gazed at the girl protecting the roses, alone in the rain. A sense of guilt throbbed in his chest.

2

Returning to the large tree, Cleo passed through the crevice to enter the hollow cavity, pulling off his boots, and standing them up upside-down. His sopping wet clothes as well, he pulled it all off until he was left in a single pair of undergarments. HE wrung out his handkerchief time and again as he wiped down his body, hurriedly plunging into his sleeping back. The wet clothing was left hanging on a simple drying rack made

of tangled branches.

When he lay and closed his eyes, the image of Roselyne from before floated on the back of his eyelids. A renewed guilt leaked a languid sigh.

(Good grief... when will this rain let up?)

He got the feeling the rain sounds unempathetically grew stronger.

(Even so, it suddenly grew cooler the day before last. Looks like we were in a heat wave right before that.)

What month, what day was it? Cleo could no longer tell, but it was presumably the end of the ninth month, or the start of the tenth. Meaning summer was already over. No wonder it was cool.

(I'm thankful to be free of nights too sultry to sleep... but I need to watch carefully for the season to change.)

It was hard to say his sleeping spot was hygienic. A slanted diet of nothing but fruit.

Days of wandering the forest with Roselyne, spending his stamina until he was ragged every day.

There were plenty of factors to break his body. No, considering what he'd been through, it was an environment that made it bizarre he hadn't collapsed from a fever long ago. A mystery as to why he was safe to this day. He even found it uncanny.

(What happened to my body? Was there some sudden change? Or is this that power of nature I hear about?)

Grrrr.

His stomach suddenly growled. It was around time for lunch. A healthy appetite truly was the symbol of good health, but he had nothing to eat, so reaching a hand to his canteen, he distracted his hunger with water.

(If my body really has become sturdier, then there's nothing I'd be happier about, but...)

But.

(I might've overdone it a bit. Twenty minutes? Thirty? If you're in the rain so long, you don't have to be me to catch a cold, generally speaking.)

And if he did catch a cold here, with no doctors or medicine... a chill ran down his spine, and Cleo pulled the sleeping bag up over his head.

Without anything to do, he lounged around with time simply passing him by.

(...I'm hungry...)

The rain failed to show the slightest signs of stopping.

(I'm sure Roselyne's still in the same position, doing her best...)

Even if it wasn't a passing drizzle, a little more, and the rain should at least weaken. When that happened, he could go search for fruit. He could bring some back for Roselyne as well. Lately, Cleo had gotten around to climbing trees just a little bit.

(If I get some... then I'm sure... Roselyne will be happy too...)

His head dazing out in hunger, Cleo was dozing off unaware.

His consciousness teetered between the threshold of on and off.

The rhythm of the rain he could hear from outside comfortably seeped into his resting ears—



3

The rain carried on throughout the whole day.

4

The rain water collects on the leaves and branches; it forms pools near the tips of the leaves, waiting intently for the moment it spills out. Faint moisture indiscernible to the eye gathers, little by little, as the surface tension binding the leaf and the droplet finally greet its limit. The moment the drop parts, the leaf lightly springs up.

Plip–

On the ground, the drop bursts like a small firework.

As if that was the signal, Roselyne took a large stretch.

Before daybreak. The eastern sky already shone in a faint white.

The rain had let up only a moment ago. A splashing sound came from above. It was surely the water pooled on the flower growing from Roselyne's head. When she tilted down her upper body as if taking a deep bow, it slowly drained out. She made a bowl with her two hands to accept it, drink it, and wash her face. It was a crisp wake-up.

She carefully removed the dome of leaves.

The ground around was still damp, and there were a number of puddles around. But nary a drop had fallen on the grafted roses. As if here alone, a hole had opened in the clouds, the ground wasn't wet at all.

Roselyne gave a triumphant grin. Ukukuh, she laughed.

Tossing the bundle of branches that had finished their purpose aside, she restlessly looked around.

"Cleo is... is he still asleep?"

It was almost sunrise. She decided to get him, a hum on her breath.

“The Cait Sidhe wiiiith the speeectacles—♪.”

Roselyne was in a good mood.

She repeated it thrice, and when the song was about to end the fourth time, she had reached the large tree where Cleo slept and woke. As a continuation of her hum, she called out in a loud voice.

“Cleeeooo, it’s morning!”

She bent over, peering into the depths of the crevice. While the inside was dim, she managed to confirm Cleo was there.

“Look, the rain is over! The blue roses didn’t get wet at aaaalll!”

Ukukukukuh!

...Silence.

“Hey, Cleoo.”

But no response. A wee crease greeted her brow.

“Wake up already. Mr. Sun is going to come out.”

Extending her bine, she tapped against Cleo’s face as he lay in the crevice.

“Mn?”

Feeling a queer unease, she stuck the vine onto his forehead.

“...Whoa, it’s hot! What is this?”

There, perhaps roused by Roselyne’s boisterous voice—or perhaps having opened his eyes long ago—the sleeping bag wriggled and the fastner sluggishly fell.

“...Goo...”

No different than a zombie revived from its grave, Cleo slowly lifted his torso. And,

“...Gwwd morning... Rose...”

Hac hic hoc!

His body swayed up and down in his coughs.

Roselyne ended up momentarily dazed.

“Wha... what’s wrong, Cleo? What happened to your voice?”

After a few pained gasps, Cleo finally said this in a thin voice.

“I-it wooks wike... I cut a gold...”

Cough, cough!

“Cold...? Wait, what? What does that mean?”

Roselyne grew increasingly confused, before Insteen whod remained silent to that point informed her.

‘Don’t you think he might be sick?’

Cleo’s torso was so unsteady it might fall at any moment. His eyes were hollow.

Roselyne turned her head like an owl.

“Sick? What’s that?”

‘You don’t remember? Oh well, it was a long time ago, when you were so small that you got sick.’

“...I don’t remember that at all. So what does sick mean?”

‘To put it simply, it means his body is in a bad state. It can make you sluggish, make you heat up... when you touched him, his forehead was hot, right? Well, I don’t know

too much about human sickness, but from what I can see, he's in quite a bit of pain, right?"

"Eh? It hurts? Cleo, hey, does it hurt?"

Cleo's body hung as loosely as ever.

His head fell forward in a nod. Should she take it as a yes? Roselyne understood it so.

"So that's how it is. Then wait a second."

Retrieving the canteen littered near the sleeping bag with a vine, she dexterously removed the cap, and tilted it over Cleo's head. Just when the mouth was about to spill water,

'Wait, wait, what are you trying to do?'

The canteen jerked to a stop, one or two drops splashed out and curst over Cleo's head.

"Eh? I mean, it hurts because it's so hot, right? So if I cool him down..."

'You can't. That'll just make his sickness worse.'

"It will? Then what do I do to make him not-sick?"

'I don't know how humans cure their sickness. But... right, have him take in nutrients and sleep soundly. That sounds best.'

Grrrrrrrrr.

Roselyne's stomach suddenly sounded. While she was protecting the blue roses, she hadn't e aten anything.

"Nutrients... you're talking a bout foot. I'm also hungry. Wait right there, Cleo. I'll go get you some fruit."

No longer with the drive to speak, even so, Cleo put in as much effort as he could muster, powerlessly waving his dubiously raised hand. 'Have fun.'

Roselyne smiled.

“Yeah. I’ll be back soon.”

She gallantly went on the hunt.

5

But she couldn’t honor her promise to return soon.

Gathering enough fruits to fill both hands, the moment she knew it was time to go back. In the upper canopy of a large tree she happened to see, she saw that a single yellow fruit remained on its own. Roselyne reached out a vine.

When there was just a little more to go, a hairy hand appeared from the shadow of the foliage. A monkey.

The monkey plucked the fruit, crossing from branch to branch like an acrobat as it moved through the trees.

“Hey... w-wait! I saw it first!!”

Roselyne gave chase. She chased as she launched attacks with her vines. She couldn’t even touch the nimbly dodging monkey. That was why Roselyne could never catch a monkey

Even so, she wouldn’t give up. She persistently followed wherever it went. There, luck took Roselyne’s side. The monkey’s foot slipped on top of a branch, making it drop its fruit. Her vine splendidly caught it in the air.

The monkey raised an irritated cry as it fled. With the snatched-back fruit finally in her hands, Roselyne made a congenial smile. Cleo definitely said the yellow fruit was the one he liked best. That’s why she did whatever was in her power to obtain it. For Cleo’s—

“.....aAh!”

Hurriedly turning, she took off in a mad dash. By the time she finally returned to the tree, close to two hours had gone by since she left.

Spending just a bit of time collecting her breath, Roselyne stood out before it.

“Cleo, I’m sorry, you’re hungry, right? I really am sorry. But look at this. It’s the yellow fruit. I went through a lot to get it. This monkey, you see–”

Roselyne peered into the crevice. As he had been that morning, Cleo lay with the sleeping bag wrapped around his whole body.

“Cleo, are you sleeping?”

No response returned. But she could sense he was probably awake.

“Hey... could it be you’re... angry...?”

“.....”

Paranoia brewed.

The silence of rejection filled the hollow. That was the feeling she got.

“H... here you go, the yellow fruit. It’s the one you like best, right?”

Forcing out a cheerful voice, she swiftly presented the fruit out before Cleo’s face. Still Cleo didn’t answer, or even try to move.

The fruit fruitlessly waved in the air.

“...Cleo... I’m talking to you..... why won’t you say anything...?”

In the young girl’s heart, complex emotions she had never experienced before were forming. Without understanding what they might be, the corners of her eyes finally—and it was then.

Insteen spoke.

‘Hey, by any chance, is he on the verge of death?’

“...Eh..... eEH?”

‘Pull him out a bit. Quit dawdling, hurry up.’

“Y... yeah...” Roselyne was terribly surprised by Insteen’s words, but she had learned

over many years that these states of emergency were the times to obediently obey her. Wrapping a number of vines around his body, like a mother cradling her child, she gently lifted him up, and pulled him out.

“...Cleo... o...?”

Pulling him close, she peered into his face.

Even so, Cleo didn't respond. No, he couldn't.

Hah, hah, a disorderly breath. An expression warped in pain. From time to time, his eyelids would faintly open, but the eyes behind them weren't focusing on anywhere. He didn't seem to notice Roselyne's face a mere thirty centimeters from his eyes.

Even Roselyne could comprehend the severity of the situation.

“Cleo, Cleo, are you okay? Hey, what should I do? Are you going to die, Cleo?”

‘Calm down, it's too soon to make the call.’

But... if you leave him like this, it'll be considerably dangerous, Insteen muttered in her inside voice so Roselyne couldn't hear. For the time being, she just told her what she needed to do.

‘For now, have him eat the fruit you got for him. You can't overcome sickness without strength.’

“Y-yeah, got it! Cleo... now, here it comes, open your mouth...”

She pushed what was presumably a form of pear against Cleo's mouth. That mouth only leaked a rough breath and slight groan, without any attempt to bite into the fruit.

“...Hey, he's not eating it!”

‘So he doesn't have the strength to move his mouth? Or perhaps his head is hazy from fever, and he hasn't noticed the fruit... this is troublesome.’

“What... what do I do?”

‘Right... then you chew it for him.’

“My? I chew it and... I’m going to eat it?”

‘Fool. Once you chew it and make it easier to eat, you’ll force it into his mouth. Whatever the case, as long as you can get it in his mouth, he might swallow.’

“Ah, I see... I-I’ll try.”

Crunch.

Biting into the fruit, she raised a crinkling sound as she chewed it to shreds. Once a juicy sweetness spread across her mouth, Roselyne felt she might carelessly swallow it down.

“...Uuung!”

‘What’s wrong?’

It’s nothing—she shook her head, opening and affixing Cleo’s mouth.

Now then, how was she supposed to insert it into his mout? She thought for a moment, but in the end decided to go with the most reliable method. Roselyne overlapped her lips with Cleo’s open mouth.

Mnn...

With a muddled voice, she streamed in the fruit.

In order to force it all in, , she pushed even her tongue into Cleo’s oral cavity. The fruit flesh that had mostly turned to paste mixed with Roselyne’s saliva, collecting in his mouth.

Nnnn...

Even after she had made sure it was all in, she kept her mouth locked to make sure he didn’t spit it out. Cleo’s small Adam’s apple moved in a gulp.



Once she lifted her lips, for a moment, a glimmering thread connected the two, reluctant to let them part.

‘Looks like it worked. If he has enough strength left to eat, I’m sure he’ll make it. Now keep at it.’

“Yeah!”

Once he had taken in around one and a third fruits through repeated mouth to mouth, Cleo drifted to sleep as if losing consciousness.

6

From the time Cleo fell asleep, Roselyne remained before the large tree.

Around when the sky began to darken with clouds, when she had grasped a small twig to imitate Cleo and draw a shoddy picture on the ground, she heard a groan from the crevice inside the tree.

Had Cleo awakened? Or was he having a fevered nightmare? At that miserable, pained, fleeting voice, Roselyne’s anxiety flared, and finally unable to endure it any longer, she pulled him out again.

“Aer you okay? Cleo, does it hurt?”

No response. She was hard pressed to judge whether he was up or not.

“Cleo...?”

When she peered into his face and spoke, Cleo’s eyes slowly opened, directed at her.

“Ah, you’re awake. Cleo, are you hungry? Do you want some more fruit?”

“.....”

Silently, Cleo looked at Roselyne a while before saying this.

“...Mo... ther...”

“Huh? W-what?”

A hazy look from Cleo. Those eyes seemed to be looking at Roselyne yet looking at something else. The inside of the sleeping bag restlessly squirmed. When she sensed Cleo's will and undid the fastener, a hand reached out from within to grasp the young girl's wrist like a mouth snapping at it.

"Wah! W-what's wrong, Cleo?"

".....K... uu....."

"Eh? What? One more time?"

Hah, hah, zeh, zeh, in the gaps between his disordered wheezes, he stuck in his words. Roselyne concentrated every nerve in her body to pick them up.

...I... don't want... to study... anymore.....

"...Study? Huh?"

Cleo's hand that grasped Roselyne's wrist was terribly weak, yet the desperate feelings embedded in it got across painfully clearly. Roselyne lay her hands over his, gently gripping it.

"Mother, and study, I don't really get it, but... if you don't want to do it, then you don't have to, do you...?"

"...Really...?" A little light returned to his empty eyes. "It's... okay for me to paint...?"

"Yeah. Paint your pictures. I love your pictures, Cleo."

So hurry up and get better. When Roselyne said that, the hand grasping her wrist slipped off.

As if set free from his distress—Cleo gave a pleasant smile.

In a fine voice that might dissolve into the air the moment it left his mouth,

...Thank you...

He said. His hand gently fell. He closed his eyelids and fell asleep.

Roselyne gently whipped off his forehead dotted with spheres of sweat with the palm of her hand.

She felt his fever had gone down just a bit since that morning.

7

Around evening, she mouth-fed him fruits again.

Roselyne wasn't going to sleep a wink—or so she intended. She vaguely recalled her head limply nodding up and down, and some point after that, she had drifted asleep. She awoke taken aback. The bright light of the moon quietly illuminated her body. It did seem there was a long way to go 'til daybreak.

Quietly creeping up, she peered into the crevice. Cleo was asleep, with a calm sleeping face.

She reached a vine from the hem of her raincoat, timidly touching it to his forehead.

“...It's not hot...!”

‘Looks like he's gotten considerably better.’

“...Really? Cleo's not going to die?”

‘I won't speak in absolutes. I won't, but... I'm sure he's fine.’

“Fine?”

‘Probably.’

Roselyne leaked a long, long sigh of relief.

That's good...”

And the moment she felt relieved, her hunger assailed her. She retrieved one of the remaining fruits and bit into it heartily. The flesh had lost its crunch, somewhat, but it was tasty enough.

In the crevice, Cleo raised a tranquil sleeper's breath. When Roselyne's vine poked at

his left cheek,

“Hhhmm...” He slipped some miner babble as he turned his face away.

Ukukukufuh.

Narrowing her eyes, Roselyne smiled a tender smile; and yet, those eyes suddenly changed to wear the colors to gloom.

“Hey, Insteen. Why did Cleo get sick?”

‘Who knows? I couldn’t say. But don’t you think it’s because he got soaked in the rain?’

“Rain? If it’s rain you want, I got a lot more of it on me.”

‘It’s different with humans.’

“I... see.”

She could grow countless vines from her own body. They let her grab distant items, and let her hold a lot of things all at once. They were very convenient. But now, seeing her own shadow projected by the moon, Roselyne thought this—It was almost as if snakes were sprouting from her body.

Her lonesome eyes stared at Cleo’s sleeping form. If he didn’t wrap himself in that, he said it would be too cold to sleep. Her lips quietly moved.

“Cleo is, humans are... quite feeble lifeforms aren’t they.”

It was fall. Winter was soon to come. Enough snow would fall to paint the forest in a layer of white. She would no longer be able to find the fruits- Cleo’s sole source of food- so easily anymore.

Winter- the harshest season of all- where a harsh struggle for survival unfolded among all forms of life, where only those who could endure the cold and the hunger earned the right to greet spring.

Surely, it would be impossible for Cleo.

‘I’m sure I said it before, but he has not the power to live in this forest. He somehow

made it out this time, but... ’

Insteen didn't say the words that followed. Roselyne didn't want to hear them.

“Yeah... you're right. I know.”

She softly muttered.

Roselyne, staring at Cleo's sleeping face. Her gaze changed to one of resolve.

8

Night opened to dawn.

While cool autumn days had continued over the past few days, the morning was neither too hot nor too cool. The wind that blew at times was comfortable, making for a clear autumn morning to spend at leisure. His cheek stroked by the wind blowing in from the crevice in the tree, Cleo faintly moved his eyelids, slowly opening them.

Now awake, Cleo noticed the change in his constitution.

(I'm... not cold. My head is clear. And...)

A sudden hunger struck him the moment he recalled it. His throat was parched as well.

“Canteen, canteen... there it is.”

He gulped water down his throat. It was a little tepid, but more than enough to quench his thirst.

Gr... grrrrrr.

had the water started up his vital functions? His stomach sounded loudly enough to surprise even himself. Then from outside the slit, Roselyne abruptly popped her face in.

“Cleo, you're up! Are you feeling okay? Are you?”

“Ah... good morning. It looks like I've completely gotten over my cold.”

“Really? Oh, your voice is back to normal. You were croaking like a frog yesterday, you should’ve heard yourself.”

“Oh, well, let’s see. Now that you mention it, the pain in my throat’s gone as well. How should I put this, I feel nice and refreshed.”

It was a befuddling feeling. When he was in such pain just the day before, his fever was surely astronomical, had he really recovered in only a single day?

(Normally, I’d be injected, given bitter medicine, and even so, I wouldn’t be able to get up for two to three days. But now, just by sleeping?)

It was hard to believe. But as a matter of fact, his constitution was rather fantastic.

(What happened? Did something go on while I was asleep?)

Cleo got up and looked at Roselyne’s face. She returned him a delightful, full face grin.

Slipping out of the sleeping bag—right, he was in a pair of underpants—he put on his clothes, hastily tying the threads of his boots, before stumbling out of the crevice. He got the feeling it had been quite some time since he walked on his feet. For a moment, he stumbled.

“Ah, are you okay? Need to sleep some more?”

Roselyne’s hand quickly moved to make sure Cleo didn’t collapse, but Cleo barely managed to catch himself.

“I-I’m fine.”

“Really? If you really are fine, there’s something I want to show you, but... can you walk? Ah, or do you want me to carry you?”

“Ca... carry...?”

In Cleo’s head the image surfaced of his pitiful self being cradled like a baby.

“I-I-I’m perfectly fine! I can walk!”

“You can? Then let’s go.”

“Very well. Um, but before that–”

“Mn? What’s up?”

“Do you have anything to eat, and fruit?”

Back there, his leg had stumbled from hunger.

9

He wondered where he was being taken, only to find himself at the usual ‘Cliff with Pretty Sunrise’. Cleo casually tossed aside the pith of the fruit he had finished eating. At first he had an aversion to tossing his food scraps out like that, but after imitating Roselyne, he had grown used to it by now.

“Roselyne, you wanted to show me something... what could it be?”

“You can’t tell?” Roselyne spoke with a mischievous laugh. “Look over there.”

The place that she pointed—the roses in question.

“Eh...?”

Cleo’s chest throbbed and soared.

If the thing she wanted to show was the roses, that meant,

“Don’t tell me...!”

Roselyne silently smiled. Cleo already found himself bounding off. He approached, he saw. Of the three grafted roses, two of the sprouts had grown ever-so-slightly.

“I noticed after I saw Mr. Sun not too long ago. Hey, that means it’s good, right? The blue flowers will bloom, right?” Following behind, Roselyne posed the question to his back.

“Y... yes. The grafting was a success. I don’t know how long it’ll take, but eventually, surely, it will bloom.”

His knees shook, his heart pounded out. It was the first time in his life he learned that

his feelings could soar so high in delight. Roselyne seemed pleased as well.

“Hey, is there really no way of telling when it will bloom? You think it’ll take another week?”

“A-a week, is it? That’s... probably going to be difficult...”

“Then two?”

“Y-yeaah... I wonder.”

“I see...” her expression suddenly clouded, as if to say it was pointless if it didn’t bloom in two weeks. Cleo hesitated, but there was nothing he could do about it.

“I’m... I’m sorry. I don’t know how to make flowers bloom faster...”

Like his elation had been dashed with water, Cleo sullenly hung his head

“Ah... that’s not it, I’m sorry. It not your fault, Cleo, and I wasn’t complaining... I just wanted to see the blue roses one more time with you. That’s why...”

“Eh..... oh, I, I see. A, haha...”

Cleo pat his chest in relief. But that chest had taken off once more in a difference sense than before. I want to see the roses bloom with you, that was practically the verbiage exchanged by lovers, was it not? His sickness-overcome face grew visibly red.

“I.....”

After a moment’s indecision and conflict, he muttered.

“I also want to see the blue roses bloom.”

And with a voice like the croak of a frog, he added on.

“.....With you, Roselyne.”

Right after he said it, two contradictory feelings welled up in complete unison. Regret and achievement. Those conflicting mentalities eventually mixed into muddled chaos, with Cleo losing sight of what was what—and ceasing his thoughts in the process.

To hide his face that was surely seething a shade of red, he kept his head hung. From behind, he could feel her keen eyes.

And Roselyne spoke.

“.....Thank you, Cleo...”

Something touched, snuggling up to his body.

It was Roselyne’s soft hand.

“.....!”

Cleo’s mouth opened and closed in silence; while he grew curious about the sensation on his back, he wasn’t able to think anything in his head. Eventually, she was the one to speak up first.

“Umm... hey, Cleo, you’ve done lots and lots, all sorts of things for me... but I have one more request...”

“...Eh...?” Upon hearing of a request, he had no choice but to turn. “Err... what could it be? If it’s something I’m capable of, then sure, whatever you want.”

“Um, you see... I want you to paint a Cleo painting.”

“A painting, is it? I don’t mind at all... what do you want me to paint?”

Cleo shook her head a no.

“That’s not it... I want you to paint Cleo.”

“Oh, me...? So you want... my face?”

“Yeah.”

With a nod, Roselyne quietly smiled.

Sword of Resolve

1

Two days later, after wasting three sheets of drawing paper, Cleo had finally finished a self-portrait. He compared the drawing with his face reflected back in the blade of the adamantite sword. On Roselyne's request, the Cleo on paper was smiling. But the reflected face was of a furrowed brow.

He wouldn't call it a failure, but he didn't think it was well done either.

(In the first place, there's no way you'd get a good painting, drawing the likes of my face...)

But Roselyne was happy. She held the painting up high, spinning round and round with a delightful laugh. And there, her face suddenly warped—or so it looked. It was a face that looked like it was to burst into tears, taking Cleo by surprised.

Roselyne stopped spinning, she embraced the painting to her chest and looked straight at Cleo

“Thank you, Cleo. I'll treasure it to the day I die.”

On her face was the usual smile.

(What... was I imagining things?)

Roselyne carefully folded the picture and tucked it away in the pocket of the raincoat.

“So, like, I'm not saying this is a trade, but I'll take you to a nice place. But could you want a bit? A little bit more, if possible, until the blue roses bloom.”

To Cleo, it was more than enough that his painting brought her joy. By no means did he wish for anything in return. Whatever the case, her secretive tone did draw his interest, and while he asked where she planned to take him, Roselyne shook her head left and right.

“I can’t tell you yet... but it’s a place you wanted to go.”

Beaming off her sharp canines, she wouldn’t give him any further details. There weren’t any bells ringing for Cleo, so he tilted his head. Did he ever say he wanted to go somewhere?

2

Two weeks went by. Day by day, the leaves of the trees were touched by a reddened hue. In no time at all, it had spread through the forest as a whole. Standing on the ‘Cliff with Pretty Sunrise’, gazing out over the full surface of fall colors, Cleo leaked a sky.

(How beautiful...)

The vibrant reds to shock one awake, the somewhat light reds, the dull reds. Or perhaps orange, yellow. Various colors dyed the leaves, flaring up the forest of autumn. The faint remnants of green provided a nice accent. He gazed out over it day after day, but he couldn’t feel himself growing sick of the sights. He painted pictures in a trance. He painted numerous pictures. His red paints were emptying out at an alarming rate. Looking over the finished picture, Cleo was largely satisfied. He would definitely never have been able to paint such a painting if he stayed at the Grant House mansion. Today’s workmanship was especially nice, so he wanted Roselyne to see it with all due haste. He turned and searched her out. Usually, close behind him, she’d been waiting at the edge of her seat for when the painting would be complete.

“...Huh?”

Today’s Roselyne was a little further than usual. On her knees before the grafted blue roses, she fixed her eyes on the still-slender unreliable stalks, a long look on her face.

3

Another week gone by.

They wandered endlessly from the crack of dawn, but in the end, they only managed to find three edible-looking pieces of fruit. On closer inspection, one of them was worm-eaten. From inside the hole, some sort of larva showed its face before hurriedly holding up to hide itself away. Roselyne said this.

“I can eat things apart from fruit, so you can have all of it, Cleo.”

But when it came to finding the fruit, it was all Roselyne’s efforts. Cleo had simply followed along, walking behind her. More than anything, she hadn’t been able to meet any large game these past few days, her mouth filled with a few mice at most. It hurt his heart to take it all off of her.

“No, but...”

“Then I’ll take this one.”

Without the slightest hesitation, Roselyne bit into the worm-eaten fruit. Despite Cleo’s best attempts to restrain her, “I’m fine, I’m fine,” she smashed it worms-and-all with her teeth and swallowed it down.

To Roselyne who ate animal flesh, organs and blood raw, perhaps eating a bug was of little concern. Even so, Cleo felt apologetic. When he bit into the fruit he was handed, it was strangely bitter.

That night, after saying his goodnight to Roselyne and entering the trunk of the great tree, Cleo found he had trouble sleeping as he snuggled into his sleeping bag. The largest reason was hunger. They had spent the afternoon prowling for fruit once more, but in the end, they only found two. Once he ran out of things to eat, when winter came, he’d likely starve to death before the cold could do him in.

(Should I daringly ask her to let me go home...?)

If he returned to the manor, a harsh winter was outside the window. He’d obtain sufficient food, and he wouldn’t feel the cold. But would he be satisfied with that? Could he accept circling back to those old days again?

Cleo was never allowed to go out freely. There was his weak constitution, but more than that, the Grant House was one of the few noble houses in the country, so if the son left the manner, there was a high probability an unruly lot might set their sights. Cleo might have attained freedom on his brother’s birth, but that was a freedom restricted to Grant House grounds. He could see himself inevitably holing up in his room to paint. That wasn’t too bad in and of itself, but now he got the feeling that wouldn’t satisfy him anymore. Because he had met Roselyn.

Something he made had brought joy to another. He had ended up leaning that happiness. He could likely never return to the days of consoling himself painting the paintings no one would ever look at.

(And... even if I do return to the manor, there's no telling how many years I've got left.)

As someone had told him, perhaps he wouldn't be able to live past the age of twenty.

For argument's sake, if he reached thirty, if he reached forty—at the time he died, he'd surely be alone. The maid who brought the food would notice the body and silently clean up the mess. When his father heard the report, his brow wouldn't even twitch. No one would mourn. No one would remember. At such a wretched notion, a tear spilled through the gap in his closed eyelids.

In that case, perhaps he was better off dying here with Roselyne. He thought.

Around that time, under the dim light of the moon, Roselyne stood still over the Cliff with Pretty Sunrise.

She stared fixedly at the grafted blue roses. The buds had yet to sprout.

"Hey, Insteen, you're smart. Can you tell me when these blue roses will bloom?"

Who knows, Insteen answered. 'I can't tell either. But perhaps it'll be next spring.'

"Next spring? You're saying it's that far ahead?"

Panic found its way into Roselyne's voice.

'I said perhaps. What flower will bloom when? I don't know anything that's not necessary for your survival. All I'll tell you is you're better off not getting your hopes up too high. Worst case scenario, those blue roses might not survive the winter.'

"No way...!"

When Cleo went to the trouble of grafting them, and when that even succeeded, was the winter going to render it all pointless?

(...No, that's not the problem.)

That was to Roselyne, in a sense, something that mattered little in the long run. Roselyne wanted to see the beautiful opening blue roses together with Cleo. If they died in the winter or bloomed next spring, it was already too late by then.

"Do I have to give up on seeing the flowers with Cleo..."

She powerlessly muttered. It did seem Insteen had picked up her sentiment.

'That's right, winter is soon upon us. If the cold days go on, he'll surely grow sick again. His constitution will fail without food to eat, I doubt it'll go as well as last time.'

"...Yeah."

A small nod from Roselyne before she hung her head. IF she was to give up, then what day would they part? Tomorrow, or the day after that?

(Tomorrow... I say goodbye to Cleo tomorrow...?)

She thought she had made her resolve. Even so, when she thought of saying her farewell, her chest grew as pained as if it were torn asunder. It suffocated. She didn't want this. She didn't want it after all.

"...Hey, Insteen."

With eyes not focused on one single point, Roselyne mumbled incoherently.

"Maybe... in two days, maybe three, we might at least see a bud, right...?"

'Roselyne.' A calm, and yet harsh-toned voice resounded through her brain. 'You decide what you're going to do.' She had been forsaken. But that coldness had brought a level-headedness to Roselyne's heart. She closed her eyes, sucked in a large breath, spat it out. And she thought. Putting Cleo's life and her wish on the scales, she sought out an answer that would leave no regrets. Slowly, her eyes opened.

"If it's cold tomorrow, I'll lead Cleo out of the forest."

'Your cold and his cold are different.'

"I know. It's cold if Cleo says it's cold. But if it isn't..."

Then taking him out of the forest would be deferred to the day after that.

'And how many times do you plan on repeating that?'

"Three days. If there's no bud in that time... then that's when I'll give up."

With a face in prayer, Roselyne gazed at the blue rose stalks floating up in the pale light of the moon.

4

Around the time the sky opened to dawn, Cleo woke from his slumber.

The cold air blowing in from the entrance crevice probed through his sleeping bag for a point of entry. His cheek stroked by the flow of chilled atmosphere, perhaps that was what had woken him.

When he crept out of the sack, the cold clad his entire being. His body shook. Struggling with his cold-numbed fingertips, he tied the string of his boots when he heard a voice from outside.

"Cleo, are you awake?"

"Ah, yes."

Cleo rounded the crevice out.

"Good morning, Roselyne."

"Good morning, Cleo... is it a good morning to you?"

Cleo couldn't understand the intent of the question. As he mulled over what to answer, a gust of wind blew through him. He inadvertently ducked his shoulders and huddled his body tight. The outside air was incomparably colder than anything he experienced in the crevice.

"Cleo... are you cold?"

Roselyne asked quite timidly. The second question.

(Could it be she's looking out for my health?)

Perhaps the first question was her asking about his body's condition that morning. There was no use in lying, but he didn't want to worry her, so he responded with as much pep as he could muster.

"Yeah, it is a little cold today. Thanks to that, my head's cleared right up."

Ahahaha, he showed a laugh.

"...I see, so its cold."

Roselyne laughed too. The two of them laughed. But soon, huh? Cleo thought. There was a strange shadow cast over her laugh. Before he could tell what that shadow was, she said this.

"Got it. Then Cleo, we're going out. Get your belongings together."

"Pardon?"

"I'll be waiting at the cliff."

And Roselyne walked off.

Pain supplies, canteen, adamantite sword, sleeping bag... getting it all in his rucksack and slinging that over his back, Cleo walked off towards the 'Cliff with Pretty Sunrise'. From the gap in the grove right ahead raced a number of light lines, at times assailing Cleo's eyes. The morning sun had already shown its face. The dust danced in the warm light, glimmering beautifully.

His eyes narrowing at the radiance, Cleo thought.

(Going out, she says. Where could we be going? A long trip in search of fruit? Or could it be the good place she mentioned before.)

After passing between tree and tree, climbing over a fallen trunk, the surroundings

had grown a shade brighter. Cleo made it through the grove to arrive at the Cliff with Pretty Sunrise.

Roselyne stood, bathed in the honey-gold morning sun. Her back emphasized by that backlight stood radiant, divine against the backdrop of the great mother nature.

Cleo was momentarily entranced by her splendor. His voice wouldn't come out.

He felt she was especially beautiful today.

Beautiful—yet be that as it may, she carried a sort of sorrow that tightened his chest.

When he looked at the back, Cleo got the feeling she was crying, making him hesitate to call out. And there, it was Roselyne who noticed his presence and turned.

Roselyne quietly smiled.

She looked at Cleo and nodded.

“Alright, let's go.”

I was imagining things, Cleo felt relieved as he made for her.

“Umm... so where are we going?”

The next moment came a sound, the swish of the air being sliced.

Something had stuck into the turned around Roselyne, in the space between her back and hip. In a face warped in shock, Roselyne crumbled down at the knees. What stuck in was a single arrow.

Cleo stood dazed, unable to comprehend what was happening before his very eyes.

5

“Kid, now! Hurry over here!”

Came a voice. A man's voice. When Cleo turned, around ten meters away, stood two men hidden by the forest thicket.

“I coated that arrow in an anti-magic-beast numbing agent! Its movements should be dull, so you’ll be fine! Now hurry, run for it!”

A bow in hand, a man with a large scar across his cheek wrung his voice to its limit and beckoned at him. He suddenly attacked, told him it was safe, and wanted him to come over. Incomprehensible. The inside of his head was pure white. He heard Roselyne groan. That’s right, Roselyne was shot!

“Roselyne, are you okay!?”

Roselyne was prostrate over the ground. Her limbs twitched and convulsed.

“Urrgh... o... owwww...”

She reached a vine from the hem of her raincoat. Its movements were dull and weak. She coiled it around the arrow stuck into her. Roselyne clenched her fist, pain moans escaping the gaps in her grit teeth.

Urrgggh...!

The same time as the arrow came out, a sharp shriek gushed out of Roselyne.

“Oy, kid! What are you doing! Hurry and get over here!”

The scarred man cried in a panic. Cleo hurriedly lowered his rucksack, pulled out the adamantite sword, and answered with a stance.

“W... who are you people!”

He covered Roselyne writhing anguished on the ground with his back.

There of the two-man party, the other, a man with an indigo mantle took a step forward.

“Oy, brat, you’re in the way. Move. You wanna be burned with her?”

He said- no attempt at hiding his irritation- as he held out his right hand.

“Wait, wait, Carnac!” The cheek-scarred man hurriedly contained the mantled man’s hand. “Boy, that’s no human! She’s a magic beast called the Maneating Flower! She

draws humans close with that form and her words, and eats them up just as the name implies! You're being led on!"

"I know that! But you're wrong!"

Cleo cried out. He had finally swallowed the situation. They—or at least the cheek-scarred man—were trying to save him from a man-eating magic beast. But that was mistaken.

"She, Roselyne is definitely not human. I know that. But she isn't trying to eat me. Ah... no, she did try when we first met, but it's different now! When I got lost in this forest, I only made it safely to this very day—for around two months I presume—thanks to Roselyne's help!"

He went on and on in one breath.

"Ah? Roselyne, he says?"

The mantled man shrugged his shoulders, before saying something to the man beside him. He was quite likely fed up with someone sticking a name on a magic beast. Cleo's face grew hot at once, more in anger than embarrassment. While he was one thing, he got the feeling they were making fun as Roselyne as well. When they didn't know the first thing about her!

Meanwhile, the scared man didn't respond to the mantled man's talk, his serious eyes still trained on Cleo. It seemed he was intently trying to confirm something. And he asked this.

"You said you were lost in the first for two months. Boy... are you Cleo Grant?"

"Eh? Y-yes, that's right..."

Cleo was shocked at the sudden utterance of his name. But the scarred man was even more surprised. "Cleo Grant!" He raised his hands high in celebration, calling out. And once more, he sonorously called Cleo's name. "Cleo Grant! We did it, Carnac! Two hundred thousand gelt! That's goodbye poverty right there!"

Cleo couldn't see what the man was so excited about. Two hundred thousand gelt? The mantled man made a sour face. You want to drag that brat back? We're here to hunt the Destroyer of the forest—he got the feeling he heard. The cheek-scarred man

advanced on the mantle with the momentum of a turtle's snap.

"Of course! This is the first bit of luck that's fallen into my lap from the moment I was born! If you're so disinclined, I'll take responsibility alone, and take him back! In exchange, you're not getting a single gelt!"

The mantled man winced back a step before clicking his tongue. He scowled long and hard at Cleo.

"Oy, brat! We'll take you home, so get over here. Quit dilly-dallying!"

"Hey stop that, you're scaring him," the scared man forced his way through, pushing the mantled man aside. "Boy, my name is Doggrun, this one is Carnac. We're hunters. No one suspicious, mind you. I'll be perfectly honest here. We want to take you to the Grant House Manor for no other reason than the reward. I'm making an earnest plea, could you come with us?"

Cleo felt sincerity in the words of the man who called himself Doggrun. He was honest in his true desire for a reward. Cleo felt he could trust him, but—

At that time, Roselyne raised her body with a groan. It was likely the influence of the numbing agent. Sluggishly, and painfully, the breath she breathed was rough, and finally, she pressed her knees to the ground as she raised her face.

"Are... are you okay, Roselyne?"

Cleo squatted down beside her. Breathing with her shoulders, Roselyne looked at him like she wanted to say something. He waited.

"...se guys..."

"Eh... w-what was that?" He brought his ear by her mouth.

"Those guys... said they would take you... home?"

"Ah... yes, that does seem to be the case..."

"I see..."

Roselyne looked down and spoke.

“That’s good... go home.”

“Eh...?”

Cleo doubted his ears. His mind failed to catch up to such unthinkable words.

“Truth is... that’s what I planned to do today... but I’d only be able to get you out of the forest... those guys say they’ll take you all the way home, right? They piss me off quite a bit, but... if they’ll take you, I’ll put up with it...”

“N-no, but... Roselyne,”

“I’m fine... my body’s moving better now, if I rest a bit more...”

So go—Roselyne said with a smile.

An orb of sweat hung on her forehead, that smile was surely the most she could muster.

Cleo couldn’t move so soon. He desperately collected his chaotic mind. Return home, spend those lonely days again, and someday die in isolation, or have the curtain close on his life with Roselyne worrying over his sick self. Which one would bring more happiness? He thought?

But he had reached his answer the night before.

Rising to his feet, he informed the two men.

“My apologies, but I have no mind to go home. Please give up on the reward.”

“W-what was that?”

Doggrun widened his eyes. The other man, Carnac seemed taken aback as well. And Roselyne was no exception.

“What are you talking about, Cleo...!?”

“I’m talking about not going home.”

“I heard that...! But you said it, didn’t you? When we first met, you wanted me to lead

you out of the forest... you wanted to go home...!"

"I did think so back then. But it's different now. My wish changed. Have you forgotten?"

"...Eh?"

"I want to see the blue roses bloom with you."

Roselyne lost her words a while.

Her eyelids were wide open, her moist glimmering eyes looked up at Cleo.

Her lovable lips quivered.

"B... but maybe they won't bloom. Even if they do, it might be a long, long time ahead. If the food runs out before that, Cleo, you'll die...!"

Cleo's feelings were firm. He responded at once.

"That's fine. When it happens, it happens."

"It's not fine! Cleo, you can't die!"

Roselyne was poised to cry at any moment. When he thought of how he was making her cry, Cleo's chest stung. But he wanted her to understand.

I—

Having heard Cleo and Roselyne's exchange, the men exchanged words in a whisper.

"Doggrun, you're not getting cold feet, are you?"

"...Yeah, I know, I get it."

By the time he noticed it, Roselyne's pained expression had considerably approached the normal. The sweat on her brow had drawn back. Her breath was only a little out

of order. There wasn't long to go until she was completely free from the numbing agent. To Cleo's relieved back, Carnac called out.

"Oy, brat, I've no mind to drag along someone who doesn't want to go, but that one won't protect you anymore."

"...What makes you say that?"

Cleo turned around and sullenly asked.

He had spoken his will, he wanted them to get going already. The other man aside, he couldn't come to like this Carnac fellow.

With no regard to Cleo's feelings, he spoke as if it was nothing at all.

"Because we're going to hunt her."

Beside him, Doggrun silently spread his bow.

"Wha... wait, wait a minute! What are you talking about!?"

"You don't get it, brat. We're hunters. It's only natural for a hunter to hunt a magic beast."

"B-but she protected me! There was a time she saved my life when I was about to be eaten by a bear! She's not just a magic beast!"

"No, a magic beast's a magic beast."

Carnac shook his head left and right, brushing aside Cleo's assertion.

"You said it back there. She tried to eat you at first. You just happened to not be eaten, but the maneating flower's called the maneating flower because she eats men."

"T-that's..."

His words held up. Sure enough, if Roselyne's whims weren't stirred, Cleo would have been eaten long ago. And at the time she said this. 'I ate a swordsman,' 'He irritated me, so without killing him first'.

“No, but to Roselyne, that’s simply predatory behavior and...! She’s by no means a malicious existence–”

“I know that.”

Carnac’s words were as cold as ice.

“Listen well. For us hunters, when the hunt is on, we live by the rules of nature. The strong eat the weak to live, that’s just nature. So there’s no guilt to be had in killing a beast. No grudges had in dying by one. Going through with those rules is the pride of a hunter.”

Poised with his bow, Doggrun quietly nodded.

Carnac glared at Roselyne as if setting his aim on his prey.

“That maneating flower lives in nature. We’ll have her follow its rules.”

And he stuck out his right hand. Cleo sensed it. This man held no weapons, he was surely a magician. He posed the question to Roselyne who was still sat on the ground.

“Can you move?”

“I won’t say I can’t, but...”

Roselyne grit her teeth, vexingly shaking her head. It looked like it would take a little more time before she could move normally. Whether it be running or fighting, until she recovered, that was out of the question. Cleo would have to buy time. Carnac’s rage-induced cry thundered out.

“Did you get that, brat!? If you get it, then move! Do you want to stay in this forest even after the Maneating Flower is gone? I’ll ask you one more time when the hunt is over!”

Those words meant, whether Cleo returned home or not, whether he received a reward or not, that was irrelevant to his hunting of Roselyne.

(In that case, this is all I can do...!)

Taking a stance with the adamantite sword, he cried out to encourage himself

“I won’t forgive... anyone who hurts Roselyne!”

The tip turned to the hunters clattered and shook. He grit his teeth, he put as much power as he could muster into his two hands, but it wouldn’t stop. Voices rose up front and behind all at once.

“No! Cleo, it’s dangerous, move!”

“Boy, don’t try anything stupid!”

Doggrun lowered his bow and tried to close the distance with Cleo. But, “Wait, partner,” Carnac stopped him. The sharp eyes of a carnivorous beast pierced through Cleo.

“Brat, I, you see, I hate those guys who talk big, put on airs when they’re not up to it.”

Carnac’s right hand remained aimed at Cleo.

“You’ve got ten seconds. If you don’t move, I’ll have to admit your resolve’s the real deal.”

“Boy, put away your sword and move! This guy isn’t the sort to say, ‘nice resolve, I like you’!”

“Cleo, don’t worry about me! Don’t do anything stupid!”

Ten seconds went by too fast.

Cleo didn’t move.

“Fine. Then you die first.”

A breath in-between, Carnac changed the magic word.

“Blaze.”

In front of his palm, a shimmering red ball of fire appeared. Just as Doggrun cried, “Wait!” the round had been fired. The ball of flame approached at a fearsome pace, dropping altitude, changing its trajectory to crawl along the ground. If Cleo leapt aside, the Roselyne who was still unable to stand would be unable to avoid the impact. So

that was the magician's aim. But,

(Flame magic... then I can do this!)

Cleo felt as if the goddess of luck had saved him. This wouldn't go for any magic that wasn't fire. With a lost stance, he thrust the adamantite sword into the ground to suck in the fireball. Unaware it was no goddess, but the mischief of the devil.

It wasn't as it Roselyne had noticed. She had simply frantically stretched out her vine to protect Cleo. But as she had yet to recover from her paralysis, her dull-moving vine barely fell short.

The fireball was sucked into the adamantite sword, swallowed whole. That much went as Cleo planned. The next instant, a crack ran down the point. Cleo could sense the abnormality from the sensation in his arms. But it was already too late. The tip of the sword—shattered to pieces.



From the remaining cross-section of the blade, the compacted heat energy was released all at once. A flash like lightning enveloped both of Cleo's feet. The words of the swordsman Greg revived in his head.

'A sword made of Adamantite is brittle, it shatters too easily. They're not suited for real combat—'

"Carnac, what have you done...!"

Doggrun muttered in a daze. But he knew it would come to this. This magician, his partner, would never turn back on anything he said. If he said he would do it, he'd do it for real. That being the case—

"He was still a child. There was no need to go that far..."

Carnac's brow didn't twitch, he simply said this.

"He might be a brat, but he was at an age where he could at least understand the result of the actions he chose for himself. More importantly, it looks like that brat had an adamantite sword. As expected of the rich, I guess."

Is that why he stood against fire magic? But his aim was off.

Cleo was blown off, he collapsed face-down.

While it was faint, the scent of burnt flesh lingered. He had presumably suffered considerable burns.

"Cleo, Cleo—!"

The maneating flower crawled along the ground to cling onto his body. She shook him. There was no response.

"Don't worry, Doggrun," Carnac said. "The one who killed the brat was me. You just watched. No, you tried to stop me. If I'm ever caught, I'll testify for you."

And he repeated it again. So don't worry, partner—

“...Stupid, you think I’m going to sell you out to the guard?”

Doggrun leaked a great sigh.

“You simply lived through the way of a hunter. That’s why... well, nothing you can do about it. As your partner, I’ll make my resolve. What we need to do now is deal with the prey before our—”

Doggrun sent another glance to Cleo. And he was startled.

Clinging to Cleo’s collapsed body, the maneating flower glared towards him with eyes stained in tears.

That wasn’t the look of a magic beast. Having wandered the battlefield as a mercenary, Duggrun knew that face. The grudge of a woman whose beloved was hurt had been carved onto the flower’s face. Even Carnac opened his eyes wide, unmoving for a moment.

The maneating flower’s mouth moved to mutter something.

I’ll kill them—Roselyne said.

‘Wait!’ Insteen cried, but Roselyne didn’t wait.

The maneating flower, still sat on the ground, largely lurched her back. Her green hair restlessly squirmed. Doggrun’s sense as a hunter warned him that was a motion in preparation for an attack. Was she sucking in air? What was she trying to do? No, he could guess...

Right after, the maneating flower breathed a purple breathe. She spat it with force, almost like a dragon breathing fire. The area was, at once, enveloped in a purple-tinted mist.

“Carnac, don’t breathe it! It might be poison! We’re pulling back!”

“Don’t be stupid! The maneating flower’s a rare one that fetches just as much as the

destroyer of the forest! Like hell I'll let her slip away in the smoke!"

Wrapping his mantle around his mouth, Carnac thrust his body out of the thicket. Doggrun lowered his stance to secure a supply of air, searching out his prey's form from the shadows. If his partner wasn't giving up, then his role was to do everything in his power to end this hunt as soon as time permitted. He opened his eyes wide. There she was.

"She's still exactly where she was before! Can you aim?"

"Leave it to me!"

Carnac stuck out his right hand.

At that moment, Doggrun suddenly noticed. Mixed in with the fragrance of a rose in bloom, the purple mist held a scent he had smelled somewhere before. It's been said that the sense of smell is the easiest to link to memory. The image that floated to mind. Back when he was a mercenary, that was definitely when they were besieged. Doggrun heard the barking of his captain and ran to the powder magazine—

"W-wait, Carnac!"

"Blaze."

The voices overlapped.

As a matter of fact, the mist Roselyne breathed held no toxicity. Its identity was a simple flammable pollen she produced in her body, mixed in with the oxygen gas she formed through photosynthesis. And now a spark came in the form of fire magic. Between pollen particle and pollen particle, combustion brought forth combustion, as the heat spread throughout the vapor with enough force to create a shockwave.

A dust explosion.

A roar. A tremor. The Cliff with Pretty Sunrise was enveloped in hellfire as a hot wind swept violently over it.

Eventually came the still.

A burnt scent hung in the air as a remnant of the incident that had just happened.

Radiating from the spot that became the center of the explosion, countless trees had been smashed and stained in black soot. The disastrous scene was close to ground zero in severity, growing calmer the further one was away. It was like a domino chain that had been stopped half-way through.

The blue roses lay just barely outside the blast radius. It was lucky that the thicket and trees protected them from the winds. That being said, the fact the still-precarious scions didn't snap off could be called miraculous. Perhaps that alone had been looked over by the goddess of fortune.

And Cleo regained consciousness.

He heard a voice calling out to him.

"Cleo, Cleo, get a grip..."

Timidly, fearfully, his shoulders were shook.

"Cleo, please, open your eyes..."

He slowly raised his eyelids.

It was as if he was looking at the world through a fogged glass. His field of vision wouldn't set. He vaguely perceived Roselyne's face. Frantically focusing his eyes, he could tell she was making a relieved smile.

Roselyne's hair was all over the place, a number of petals had been torn from the flower on her head.

(What happened when I was unconscious...?)

The rucksack lay next to his sprawled-out self. Perhaps Roselyne had brought it over.

Cleo tried to raise his voice and was shocked. His mouth wouldn't move as he wanted.

Earnestly putting power into his jaw, he squeezed air out of his lungs, just managing to spin out a faint voice.

“...Those... people...?”

Roselyne answered.

“Those people... those guys? It’s fine. Even if they survived, they must have suffered terrible injuries. They won’t be able to attack us anymore.”

If they survived—meaning it was that great of an attack. While Cleo was out cold, Roselyne must have fought them off.

(So in the end... I wasn’t able to do anything. How useless can I...)

Self-criticism floated in his heart.

Whatever the case, he thought he should get up. That proved even more difficult than mustering his voice. His body wouldn’t listen to what he wanted to say. It was almost as if it wasn’t his own body at all.

When he groaned in his throat and mustered all his power, Roselyne hurriedly interrupted him.

“Cleo, don’t push yourself! You suffered some serious injuries. Your legs... are bleeding a lot.”

Roselyne sent her eyes to Cleo’s legs, her face grimacing as if she was looking at something repulsing.

(A lot of blood...? I can’t believe it. There’s no way Roselyne would lie, but...)

I mean, it doesn’t hurt at all.

Forget hurt, there wasn’t even any sensation. He even felt as if he lost his legs entirely.

Eventually, his consciousness muddled. Roselyne’s face was even hazier than before. It grew difficult to set the focus of his eyes. Her voice as well, it sounded like he was hearing a conversation in the distance. Cleo instinctually understood. He felt a strange conviction.

(I'm going to die...)

He had lived his life knowing he wouldn't live long. As long as Roselyne was with him, he didn't mind losing his life in this forest; he had made his resolve.

Even so, with death right before his eyes, Cleo's heart was shaken.

(I won't be able to speak with her, sing with her laugh with her anymore...)

He would have to relinquish the slice of happiness he had finally lain hand on.

That was heart-rending. Sad. Terrifying.

Cleo thought. I don't want to die like this.

Was there something, anything that could save him as he was?

With all the power left to him, he reached out his hand.

His shaking digits were held. Roselyne gripped them for him.

"Cleo, get a grip. What should I do? What can I do to save you? Tell me like you always do."

A desperate voice pleaded to him.

"Roselyne..."

Gazing at her face with his unset focus, Cleo called out. Yes, what should I do? Roselyne drew her face close. Cleo informed her in a chipped voice.

"When I die... please eat me."

".....!?"

Roselyne drew her body back in shock.

"W... what are...!? What are you talking about!" She screamed in rage. "That's not what I'm asking! What I want you to tell me is—"

“Please... when I die, please eat me. I want you to eat me...”

Cleo repeated regardless. When he was unable to do anything, at the very least, but sating her hunger, he could be useful in the end. And—

“If you eat me, I’ll become your flesh and blood, we can be together forever. When I think of it like that... death isn’t so scary...”

Seeking out his salvation—while he barely had any power left in him— he gripped Roselyne’s hand strongly.

“Stop! No more!” Roselyne’s voice had become a shriek. “I can’t understand what you’re saying! Why are you saying that? I don’t know about flesh and blood, but I wanted to be together with a living Cleo! I wanted you to live! If you were going to die, then... I was fine with not being together anymore!”

It was faint, but Cleo saw it. The large beads of tears overflowing from Roselyne’s eyes. She gripped his hand back, bending over to draw her body close and cry out.

“Hey, I’m begging you! I’m begging you, don’t die, Cleo!”

Ah, I see—he thought.

At that moment, Cleo understood it clearly.

This itself was his salvation. What he could never obtain at the Grant House. What he finally laid hands on.

(So I... wanted to hear those words.)

A smile graced Cleo’s face. His consciousness slipped away. Wait, just a little more, let me tell her these words. Burning Roselyne’s teary face into his eyes, Cleo spoke his mind.

“Thank you... Roselyne...”

And quietly closed his eyes.

It was practically a tranquil sleeping face.

“...Cleo.....?”

Roselyne reached out her hand and gently pat against his cheek.

Twice, three times she repeated.

“Cleo... wake up...”

As if tenderly urging him out of sleep.

But no matter how many times she hit against him, there was no response.

“Cleo..... I’m begging you, open your eyes!”

Roselyne shook his body. A voice resounded in her head.

‘Stop that! If you move him, you’ll just make the blood loss worse!’

She stopped her hands taken aback. Her eyes darted to Cleo’s legs.

His trousers and boots failed to keep their original form, the affected portions revealed. They were serious burns that reached the depths of his flesh. The flesh changed color, burnt black here and there. It was a state that made her want to cover her eyes. On top of that, there were places where fragments of the adamantite sword gouged deep into the flesh, and for a while now, his bleeding wouldn’t stop.

(The blood... aah... so much blood... what do I...)

The bright red color of blood spread and pooled, stealing Roselyne of her rationality.

Her mind was stuck in an endless loop of ‘what do I do’.

‘Calm down! Touch a hand to his chest, quickly!’

Insteen’s words were sharp, returning Roselyne to her senses and making her hurriedly obey.

Faint, a faint pulse was conveyed to her palm.

‘His heart... is still moving, I see.’

“Insteen, do you know? What do I have to do to save Cleo?”

Roselyne closed in on the voice in her head.

But she could imagine the answer. Insteen repeated the words she had heard countless times before.

‘All I know is what’s necessary for you to survive, Roselyne.’ And after stopping for a moment of silence, she continued this, ‘All I can say is perhaps you should honor his will.’

“Honor... what’s that? What do you mean?”

‘I’m saying you should grant his last wish. He said it, didn’t he... he wants you to eat him.’

“Stop it!!”

Roselyne raised a piercing cry, but Insteen didn’t stop. Her voice was one she couldn’t escape even if she covered her ears.

‘His death is only a matter of time. You don’t plan on eating him? Don’t eat him and then what? If you leave him, he’ll rot, the bugs will swarm, he’ll simply dissolve in a muddled mess. If that’s how it will be, don’t you think it’s better that you eat him? It’s what he wishes for as well.’

“Shut up! Shut up! I don’t want to hear that! Be quiet!”

She cried and wept.

She shook her head and smacked it against the ground. She hit the ground a number of times as if to smack in her rage. The surface of the cliff was hard, her forehead split and spouted blood.

‘Fine! I won’t say anything! So just stop that!’

A voice close to a shriek rung out.

Roselyne repeated a rough breath as she finally raised her head. Her blood and tears fell drip by drip from the tip of her chin, spilling out onto the breast of her raincoat. Her head whirled with pain and despair. She cross-examined herself with a hazy mind.

Why did it come to this?

“.....It’s all my fault...”

Slumping down on the ground, she absentmindedly gazed up at the sky.

“If I didn’t wait for the blue roses to bloom... if I returned Cleo at once...”

It wouldn’t have come to this.

It was an answer too cruel.

That was precisely the moment Roselyne came to learn what regret was.

Surely, she would never forget it for the rest of her life. That answer would torment her to the grave.

(No... that’s...)

Roselyne lowered her gaze to Cleo.

If that’s how it’s going to be, then why don’t I also—

At that moment. ‘Ah...!’ came the voice in her head.

A single syllable as if she had noticed something.

“...What is it... Insteen...?”

Insteen didn’t answer. That was all the more suspicious.

“What... did you think of something? Say it! Out with it already!”

If you don’t—Roselyne lowered her head towards the ground again.

‘You stop that! Fine, I’ll say it!’

Her bloody head stopped the moment before it collided.

‘It’s just a fool’s notion. Keep that in mind as you hear. Alright? Your body possesses a superior regenerating power. It’s incomparable to whatever the humans have. The wound from the arrow you got before will close given a night.’

“...And what about it? I don’t care about my wound! Right now, Cleo is—”

‘Just listen! I mean to say, I thought of the blue roses and wondered. If you lop off your legs, and switch them out with his tattered legs... maybe, and just maybe, it’ll stick on like in grafting.’

Lop off your legs.

Roselyne looked at her two legs. If she cut them, they’d bleed, a pain would run through her body. Not just any pain. Perhaps it would be enough... to kill her.

“Thank you, Insteen.”

Even so, Roselyne didn’t hesitate. She looked around again. The adamantite sword that had left Cleo’s hands had fallen around five meters from his body. She reached a vine to retrieve it. The point had shattered, and only around twenty centimeters of the blade remained. But she would manage one way or another. She retrieved the rucksack as well.

‘Wait! You’re seriously doing it? There’s no guarantee it’ll go well.’

Roselyne used her vines and body to gently hold Cleo up.

“Cleo said something similar when he was grafting the roses.”

There’s no guarantee it’ll succeed.

The probability of failure is higher.

“But even so, the grafting succeeded. And now, if I do it, Cleo might be saved.”

She walked with strong steps.

“In that case, of course I’m going to do it.”

After carrying Cleo to his sleeping spot, the great tree, she listened to Insteen's opinion as she cot the preparations in order. Gather six straight branches. You're to affix them so the cross section doesn't slip. With the blue sores, you bound them with thin, long blades of grass, but we'll need something stronger this time, so we'll use your vines for thread.

While she swiftly carried out the preparations, Insteen's monologue resounded sullenly in her head.

'There's something wrong with me... I never should have said anything that would put your life in danger... '

Roselyne answered without stopping her hands.

"If you remained silent, if you didn't tell me how to save Cleo, I'd have never forgiven you. I think I'd curse you for the rest of my life... that's why, I really am grateful. I love you."

A while later, Insteen asked.

'Between me and Cleo, who do you like more?'

Roselyne's hands stopped for just a short moment, and then she made an apologetic bitter smile.

"Sorry, it's got to be Cleo."

'...Thought so.'

Insteen said resignedly. Even if they were separate personalities, Roselyne and Insteen shared a single body. They were born together and would die together. Roselyne had once denied it, but the two of them were quite likely the same existence.

Yet Roselyne had chosen Cleo.

She valued something more than herself—what could that feeling be called? A magic beast's instincts such as Insteen couldn't tell.

By meeting Cleo, Roselyne was gradually changing into an existence Insteen couldn't comprehend. Insteen felt it just a little lonely. If it were the past Insteen, such a thing would never have moved her head. She had gradually changed. Unaware to it all, Insteen as well.

All the preparations were in order.

After much thought, Roselyne decided to sever her own legs first. As they belonged to a magic beast, she determined they would maintain vitality for a while even when amputated.

Gripping the hilt of the adamantite sword, she pushed the blade up against her thighs. The cold sensation sent a chill down her spine. Her arms shook. Roselyne hated swords. She loathed pain.

(...Stupid! This is to save Cleo!)

She swallowed her spit, she grit her teeth.

Roselyne turned the brutality of a magic beast on herself.

She bared her fangs on the fear in her own heart.

Putting ample power into the blade that let off a dull light. a single stroke.

For the next thirty minutes and then some, Roselyne continued spitting blood and screams.

Goodnight Roselyne

1

Cleo stood in the house of Joseph, a man once employed as the gardener of the Grant House. For some reason, he could immediately tell, oh, this is a dream.

It was surely the final dream he'd seen in his life. The dream he would see in his final sleep.

In reality, Cleo had only ever been to Joseph's house once. With his disease worsening, Joseph had said he wanted to see Cleo's face before he died. His disciple desperately negotiated with the butler Marcus, and Cleo's outing was permitted.

At this very moment, just as before, Cleo stood before a bedridden Joseph.

It looked as if his sturdy body had shrunk a size or two. Many lines raced up and down his now-slender neck. His complexion was pale, his cheeks were sunken, his skin was so transparent he might see his skull.

Even so, the look in his eyes didn't change. Letting off a strong light, he gazed kindly at Cleo.

"Young master, I'm glad you could come. It's just a cramped run-down hut, but let me get you a chair—"

As he eagerly attempted to lift his body, Cleo hurriedly reined him in.

"...I'm sorry for showing you such a state."

Don't mind it, Cleo shook his head. More than that, Cleo was the one who wanted to apologize.

"I'm sorry, I thought I'd be able to see the cactus flower bloom in your place, but... it was no good."

"That so? That's a shame..."

Joseph looked desolately up at the ceiling.

“But you know, I’m relatively satisfied. Though it wasn’t a long life.”

“Oh what’s this, did something good happen?”

Even if it was a dream, he met his long-lost dear friend. He wanted him to hear. The fact that right now, he was definitely not facing misfortune.

“I found a girl I like.”

“My, my!”

Joseph’s eyes formed perfect circles, from there he grinned, and at the end, Wahhahaha, he laughed. While his voice was cracked, a portion of his once-grand laugh still remained.

“That’s good to hear! What sort of girl is she?”

“Yeah, let’s see, she looks like a normal girl. Well, she’s got a few parts that aren’t so normal, so I’m sure if you met her, you’d be in for a surprise.”

“I see, I see! She sounds like someone I’d love to meet. But young master, this old man is seldom startled you know.”

“Oh, I wonder about that. Do you have any paint supplies around? I really must show you.”

There, Joseph grinned with his teen yellowed by the smoke of tobacco, lightly shaking his head to the side.

“No, how about you save it for next time.”

“Eh?”

“Next time, I’ll pray we can meet again sometime. Oh, there’s no need to hurry. We humans, the time comes for all of us someday. But it’s still too soon for you. How about you spend a bit more time taking it easy? I’ll be going a step ahead, kicking back with the wife.”

Suddenly, Joseph's form grew faint like the haze. But the time he noticed it, everything in the area was a blurry white. The walls, the writing desk, the lamp lighting the room, even the ceiling.

"Joseph!? What is...!"

To a flustered Cleo, Joseph grinned again.

"Young master, I hope you find happiness with her. One warning. You can't make a girl cry."

At the end of those words, the world melted into white and disappeared.

When he came to, the scene had changed. The world went from white to black. His field of vision grew distinct, he understood it was a scene he knew very well. The hollow of the tree Cleo used when he lived in the forest, The ceiling portion wrapped up in this shadows. Cleo's sleeping bag was laid out as he stretched out face up.

He sprung up.

(Is this another dream?)

In his confusion, the first blow from reality was a violent sense of hunger and thirst. That tempest of stimuli from his internal organs drew on him so vividly, he couldn't even imagine this as a dream. Just what was going on?

The outside of the crevice was dim. Just before daybreak, or perhaps the twilight.

When he stuck his face out the crevice, a gentle breeze stroked his cheek. The soft, fluttering sensation was surprisingly fresh.

(This isn't a dream? But I...)

He reeled in his memories. If he wasn't mistaken, he had confronted those two hunters, the adamantite sword shattered, and by the time he noticed it, he was collapsed on the ground. Unable to put any power in his body, his eyes and ears were blurry, his mind was steadily growing distant. Ah, so this is death—Cleo had resolved himself.

(But I'm still alive...)

He took a step outside. Roselyne was nowhere around. A call gave way to no response. In her place, he found abundant traces of blood on the ground. And the sticky blood-stained adamantite sword.

Cleo was driven by anxiety. He raced off towards the Cliff with Pretty Sunrise. Something felt off about his legs. Something was strange. Something was different. For example, his legs felt strangely light. Was he ever so fast, was he ever able to run so nimbly? He stood and looked.

Cleo's legs weren't Cleo's legs.

The skin color was clearly different. Right below the upper leg joint, a scar that was painful to even look at did a round around his thighs, and below that, the skin became a transparent white. He recalled them. These were—Roselyne's legs!

He burst off again. He spotted the trees whose trunks were burnt black. Countless broken branches were strewn about. While it was a bit late, he noticed he was barefoot. Paying that no mind, he crushed them underfoot as he ran forward. It didn't hurt in the slightest. He passed through the shrubbery and leapt out onto the cliff.

Ah! Cleo cried. Not because of the changed terrain, the scorched earth, with here and there cruelly gouged out. Cleo's head simply picked that up as occipital information. The reason for his surprise lay elsewhere. In the center of the protruding cliff, he spotted Roselyne.

Her back was as it was when she greeted the rising morning sun. And yet her body was strangely low. The hem of the raincoat spread out wide over the ground

That was almost as if she had been buried from the waist down—

“Roselyne! What happened to you! Roselyne!!”

Cleo cried out her name and raced over.

At that moment, vines grew from her back, from the burnt holes in her raincoat, a number of vines thrust out to attack Cleo. Cleo was entangled without an idea of what was going on. A vine wrapped around his neck, strangling him to the very limit. He was hung in the air.

“Roselyne... why...?”

He couldn't tell why Roselyne would attack him. Just what could have happened unbeknownst to him? Cleo scratched at the vine wrapped around his neck, desperately writhing. Gasping for breath, he diligently cried out. Roselyne, please stop, why are you... Roselyne...!

And at that time, his noose gently loosened. Cleo's body was lifted high up by her vines. The bottom of the cliff leapt into his overturned vision. Did she plan to toss him off? A brief moment of unease—before Cleo was quietly lowered in front of Roselyn. The vines around his body easily came loose.

“You suddenly rushed at me, so I thought some beast was attacking. Can't you be more careful?”

A displeased crease was carved into Roselyne's brow.

She irksomely glared at Cleo.

2

“Roselyne...?”

Pierced through by that sharp glare, Cleo felt as if he was frozen to the spot. Roselyne let out an overly painstaking sigh.

“I'm not Roselyne.”

“Eh...?”

He couldn't understand what that meant. The way she addressed herself only engendered greater unease.

“I can see why you wouldn't understand... that girl's often talking to someone in her head, right? I'm that someone. That kid calls me Insteen, so if the need arises, you may call me that as well.”

“Ms... Insteen?”

Like his old home tutors, her voice was cold, dignified and steadfast, Cleo found

himself tacking on a Ms. As she nodded a yes, he timidly asked.

“Umm, then what about Roselyne...?”

Insteen stuck his glare on him again. It rose a quiver in Cleo, who sitting on his bottom, found himself shuffling back. Roselyne was scary when she was angry, but this girl now was scary on a completely different tangent. She truly was a separate person. Insteen irritantly scoffed before explaining the details of the matter.

“You may have already noticed, but those legs of yours belong to Roselyne.”

The injuries to Cleo’s legs were severe, and if let be, he would certainly lose his life. That’s why Roselyne gave him her own. While it came with pains that didn’t fall short of the tortures of hell, Roselyne made it through to the end. When a tree’s trunk was damaged, the sap would flow to seal op that wound, and similarly, Roselyne’s blood sealed the severed portions of their body in a short span of time. But between flesh and flesh, bone and bone, the joining took far longer.

“Setting it with tree branches, Roselyne fixed it in place with her vines and waited.”

A moment’s distraction wasn’t permitted. Three days and three nights, without a wink of sleep, without food or drink she waited. While Cleo was weakened by massive blood loss. Thinking it might be helpful in the slightest, she cut her own body and fed him her blood. Again and again.

“In this girl’s case, give it three days, and a broken bone will heal up. That’s why I told her it was fine. But, let’s wait a bit more just in case, she said—”

And another two nights, Roselyne held out.

And just a few hours ago, the sleeping Cleo’s leg had twitched. That was proof that the nerves had connected. Upon seeing that, the power finally flowed from Roselyne’s body.

“But you see, in order to save you, this kid shaved away too much of her life. Her body and spirit were in tatters. That’s why she’s asleep for now.”

Apparently, her lost legs would restore with times. It was unknown how many years that would take. She said Roselyne would asleep until then.

The tears welled from Cleo's eyes. One after another, they overflowed without end.

(It's my fault... for the likes of someone like me... why...)

Roselyne's raincoat was scattered with burns, but its pocket was largely swelled out.

They were all the paintings Cleo had given them. She preciousely kept them on her person. That was the answer.

A while later, Insteen was talking again.

"It's something she decided for herself, I have no intent to chastise you. But you see, and I mean this with no ill intent, this child cannot protect you anymore. You know that river you two washed your face in every morning? If you walk along it, it will eventually connect to the main river, then if you follow that downstream—I do think you'll be walking for days, but eventually, you'll make it out of the forest."

That voice felt just a little warmer than before.

Cleo could tell she was thinking of him as she said it. But with a shake of his head, he answered.

"I'm... going to stay here. I want to stay with Roselyne to the end."

Winter was soon to come. In search of scarce prey, the starved carnivorous beasts would soon wander the forest. If he met them, it was over. In that case, he wanted to be by Roselyne to his final moment.

"This kid risked her life to save you. You plan on wasting that?"

He was aware.

If there was even the slightest possibility he could escape the forest alive, then failing to do so would mean betraying Roselyne's thoughts. But, even so...

Cleo's heart violently shook.

If he walked along the river, there was no guarantee he would return safely. There was one thing he could say with barely any mistake. If he left this place, whether he became feed for the beasts, or reached the Grant House, he would quite likely never meet

Roselyne again. Not ever, for all eternity.

(I don't... want that...)

He felt his heart might tear in two.

I want to stay here. I have to leave.

Good grief, Insteen gave a sigh.

“What’s a boy to do. Though as you are now, it might be possible to live in this forest.”

Eh? Cleo opened his eyes.

“You may not have noticed, but your hair and eyes have turned green.”

Try plucking one and look at it, she told him.

The hair he pulled—was the same green as Roselyne’s.

“This is...!?”

At that moment, the morning sun peeked its face from over the mountains, enveloping Cleo’s body in a honey-gold light. His hair restlessly stirred. As if under some order, he took a deep breath, for a peculiar power to well in his body.

Roselyne’s life had taken root within Cleo.

“Once you grow fully accustomed to those legs, I’m sure you’ll be able to run around as fast as this kid. When that happens, I do think you could at least run from the dangerous beasts.”

Cleo gently touched both feet.

What Roselyne had given him, the greatest gift in the word.

“Thank you, Roselyne...”

His welling feelings turned to tears, running down his cheeks again.

“But that also means it won’t be difficult for you to safely leave the forest. And still you plan to stay here?”

“...Yes. There’s something I’ve got to do.”

Insteen gave a small tilt of her head.

Cleo stood and walked his way to the blue roses. While the buds still hadn’t come out, they were steadily growing day by day. Someday, the blue flowers would vividly bloom.

“I need to maintain the blue roses so they don’t wilt. When the buds grow in number, I’ll graft them again. I’ll fill this area with blue roses.”

For someday, when Roselyne opens her eyes.

“I see,” Insteen turned, looking at the roses and Cleo in turn. “To be blunt, your existence is not something I should welcome. If you’re around, this child might do something crazy again. No, I’m sure she will.”

Insteen’s eyes let off a cold glimmer.

But right after that, she offhandedly shrugged her shoulders.

“But if you’re there when she opens her eyes, I’m sure she’ll be happy. So, well, there’s nothing we can do about it. In exchange, you’d better not die. If your corpse is the first thing she sees when she wakes from her slumber, there’s no telling what this kid will do.”

“I know. I’ll promise.”

I’ll definitely not die.

For a moment, Insteen made a face as if she was giving the faintest trace of a smile.

“Then I’ll be holing up. It’s quite taxing to come to the surface like this. Hope we get along. Ah, there’s one thing I should say, but don’t approach this kid’s body so carelessly. I’ll mistake you for a beast and attack. If you really must approach, do it calmly, gently okay.”

She reacted to and attacked intense emotions like bloodlust, apparently. With a bitter

smile, Cleo promised that as well.

Splendid, she said. Insteen turned forward. She said nothing further. Just as he had just promised, Cleo took a deep breath and calmed his heart before slowly, slowly he walked out before her. With her eyes quietly closed, that peaceful sleeping face belonged to Roselyne.

He gently lowered himself down. There was dirt on her cheek, he softly wiped it away with his thumb. A while later, once the morning sun had fully revealed itself, Cleo whispered into her ear.

“Roselyne, once you wake up, I’ll tell you first thing.”

I’ll tell you with a bouquet of blue roses.

“I’m in love with you.”

Was Roselyne seeing a fun dream?

In a small, small voice, Ukukuh, she laughed.



Epilogue

Winter came.

The plants, the beasts, the humans were all equally exposed to its harshness.

Many lives greeted their ends, becoming provisions for the next life. For the sake of the spring that would someday come. The seasons shift. Life and death cycle over. And the times move forward.

Ten years flow by.

In that time space, there had been a great war. Tragically defeated, invaded, the kingdom became a colony. With their deep connections to the late royal family, the Grant House was to forfeit much of its wealth to the occupying country and fell to ruin before long. The new lords imposed a heavy tax on the common citizenry, causing poor villages crumbled one after the next, and no longer able to endure the pains of starvation, the villagers of Clamberra finally set foot in the forest where they say monsters lurk. They returned with no issues. They entered the forest to hunt and gather wild plants, yet the monster of rumor never appeared. The village somehow managed to avert its destruction.

One day, a single hunter grew lost in the forest. He wandered a night, and the next morning, he finally made it back to the village. With his limp, exhausted face he said this. At midnight, in the forest depths, he heard the song of a man and a woman

“There must be faeries living in this forest.”

It must be a pair of loving fairies, the villages gossiped. For it was a happy song they sang.

Postscript

It's been a while. This is Kimito Kogi, precisely a year since my last release.

Now then, the idea for this story came to me more than three years ago. Back when I had yet to make my professional debut, I got hooked on this game called Etrian Odyssey.

That game has this young-girl type monster that's half-plant half vegetation called Alraune. The first time I encountered that monster, I thought, 'What's with this girl, she's so cute!'

(TL: Wait, what?)

The Alraune is all alone in the depths of a sea of trees. When a human finally comes all the way, she attacks them without question. There's no way she could make any friends like that. And so, until the day some highly skilled adventurer defeats her, she lives without letting her heart go to anyone. How heartrending. How fleeting.

If the Alraune met a young boy, and had some opportunity, by just a bit of chance, if she let that boy live—what would happen?

That is the origin of Flowers for the Forest Beasts.

And the months pass by, I had my ups and downs, but I finally completed this work and delivered it to you. I truly am deeply moved. I offer my deepest respects to the game that gave me this idea.

And Soto-san who drew such beautiful illustrations, I really am grateful.

Roselyne is a magic beast, she can grow vines from her back, and she eats blood-dripping meat raw. To put it in words, the heroine may be a bit close to the danger zone. But thanks to Soto-san's illustrations, Roselyne is cute, it's alright, everyone understands you. Hooray for illustrations. Hooray for Soto-san.

You may be coming last, but of course, I offer all readers my sincerest gratitude.

To those who have already read the main story, thank you ever so kindly. Are there many of you who are reading one of my works for the first time? If so, I hope you'll stick with me next time.

For those who are holding the book, but are still thinking over whether to buy it or not, why don't you bring it up to the register? When my books don't sell, it's a matter of life or death. Please cooperate so I'll be able to put out my next book. Seriously.

Well then, earnestly praying we can meet again—

April 2012

Kimito Kogi

小木君人
森林の魔獣に花束を

イラスト：もと





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